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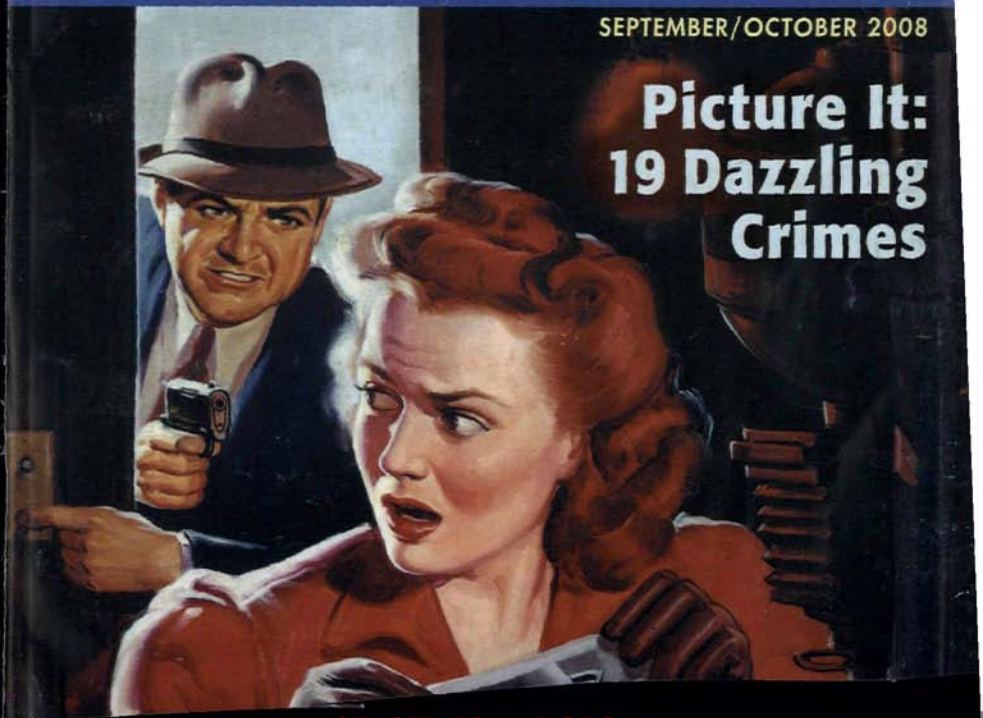

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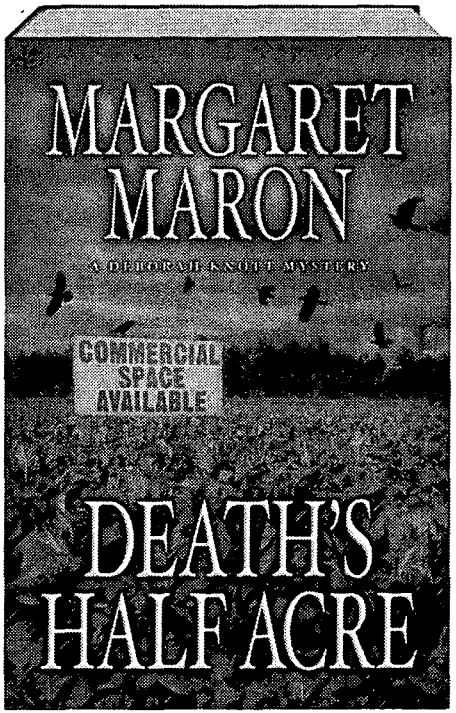

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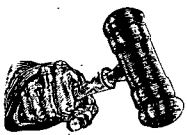

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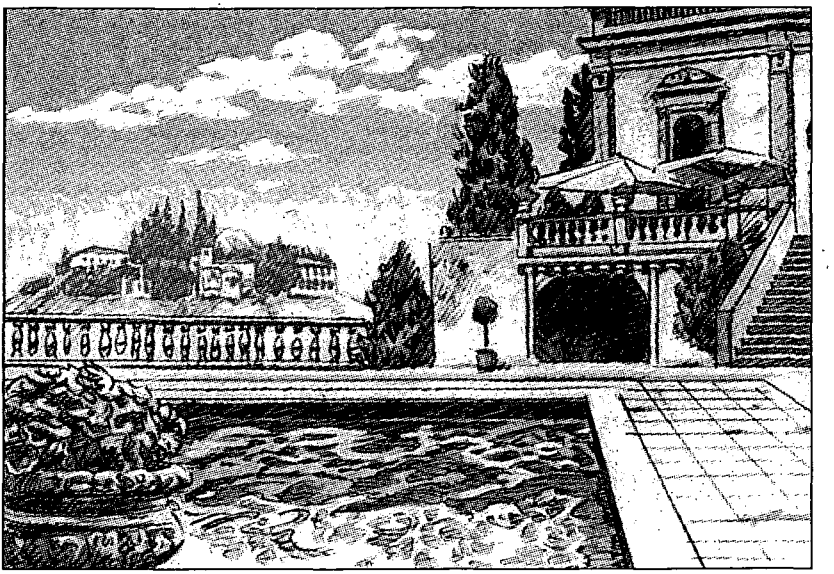

Art by Ron Bucalo

MURDER AT MONTEFUGONI

by Margaret Maron

". . . so I ask you again, Miss Harald. Who wanted him dead?"

"And I tell you again, Inspector Giordano. I don't know. I only met these people last evening."

The weekend began innocuously enough when Elliott Buntrock, one of New York's most respected art curators, shifted his chair to get out of the hot Italian sun and said, "It'll be fun." Seated in a sidewalk cafe a few quiet streets away from the Ponte Vecchio where tourists swarmed like mindless ants, he offered his companion a *crostino* thickly smeared with chopped black olives and said, "I'll rent a car. We could be at the castle forty minutes after we check out of our hotel."

The slender, dark-haired woman who sat across the table from him accepted the appetizer, but declined the suggestion. "I'm not a castle person, Elliott. Why can't we stay here in Florence?"

"Florence is hot and crowded and all the real Florentines are up in the hills. It's Tuscany, Sigrid. I bet you've never seen the Tuscan countryside."

"We're not here to look at landscapes." She picked dubiously at the wild-boar salad he had persuaded her to order. "We came to

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retrieve Nauman's paintings from that gallery."

"And their attorneys say we can't have them until Monday, so why not spend the weekend where it's cool and relaxing? I promised an old friend who's leading a tour of art enthusiasts that I'd speak to his group and he's comping me to an apartment at the castle. It would be churlish not to go. Besides," he said, knowing one of the reasons for her edgy impatience, "the place has its own swimming pool. A real pool, Sigrid, and Jim says it's never crowded."

Death's Half Acre, the 14th book in Margaret Maron's acclaimed Deborah Knott series, will appear in bookstores around the time this issue mails to subscribers. But while Knott fans have been able to follow her in a new book almost every year for more than a decade, the same is not true for fans of the earlier Maron character Sigrid Harald. The following brings Sigrid to life, and centerstage, again. †

And with good reason, Sigrid Harald thought, stroking arm over arm through the cool clear water a few hours later. More a short-term rental lodge than a hotel, the Castello di Montefugoni was built atop a steep hill and its views of trees and vineyards and more castles on distant hills were as spectacular as Elliott had promised. The self-service apartment that Dr. Jim Olson, Buntrock's friend, had booked for them was airy and spacious: two large bedrooms and an even larger dining/sitting room with a small galley and furnishings that were comfortably shabby.

Unfortunately, there were no elevators and the pool was down three long flights of ancient stone steps. All very well to learn that Dante and Boccaccio had climbed these very same steps, it still took a fairly determined swimmer to make the trek. Despite the endless stairs, though, Sigrid would have gladly walked them twice over to get to this pool. Swimming was her one reliable stress-reliever and these last few months had pushed her almost to the breaking point.

Two years ago, she had been an NYPD homicide detective leading an uncomplicated life. Now, thanks to a hasty will written by her lover shortly before he died in a car wreck, she owned an estate worth millions. She first met Oscar Nauman when one of his colleagues was murdered, and the end of her investigation marked the beginning of their affair. She had vaguely known that he was one of the giants of the art world, but modern art left her cold. It was the man himself who had attracted her, not his reputation, and she had been devastated by his death.

Almost as devastating was the realization that she could not continue to work for the NYPD and manage Nauman's estate, too, a decision made somewhat easier by a new boss who clearly resented her and never missed a chance to let her know it.

Professionally, she had been confident of her skills in solving

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tricky homicides, but she was unnerved to discover that collectors, gallery owners, and museum directors could be every bit as cutthroat as any hardened con men. Witness the Florentine gallery that had taken two of Nauman's paintings on consignment before his death and now claimed the authority to buy them outright at the original price although they had since doubled in value.

It was Nauman's friend Elliott Buntrock who had argued that the only way to get the pictures back was to come over and take physical possession of them herself. In this age of instant communication, she was infuriated that it should take a face-to-face meeting to handle the situation, but here in the water, her tension began to drain away. Swimming had gotten her through the worst of her grief after Nauman's death. It would get her through settling his complicated estate and disposing of his pictures. In giving herself up to the water, she could let her mind float blankly, aware of nothing except the water itself.

When fully relaxed, she climbed from the pool and sluiced off at a shower almost hidden in a stone wall thickly covered in ivy. As she wrapped a towel around her wet body, an attractive blonde passed, gave her a friendly nod, and continued on to one of the deck chairs, where she dropped her towel and sunglasses and stood for a moment on the edge of the deep end. She appeared to be in her early forties and her well-toned body showed firm muscles.

"Is it cold?" she asked.

"Not really. Not once you're in," Sigrid said.

The woman executed a shallow dive that took her halfway across the pool's width and there was a happy grin on her face when her head broke the surface. "Wonderful!"

"Hope I'm not interrupting?"

Sigrid glanced around to see a middle-aged man in red plaid swim trunks with a towel draped around his neck. His smile included both of them, but his eyes were on the woman in the water.

"I was just leaving," Sigrid said and walked down the long grassy allée. As she neared the terrace steps, a voice called down to her.

Looking up, she saw Elliott Buntrock leaning over the balustrade of the terrace above. Interviewers often used long-legged bird images to describe his looks; and from this angle, his bony face and angular limbs did give him the appearance of a huge, if decidedly exotic, bird. He stood with his arms outstretched on either side, his hands on the ledge, so that the front of his linen jacket swung wide like stork wings.

"Do you see a grotto down there?" he asked.

Directly beneath the terrace and out of his sight was a semicircular alcove built into the wall. A chain across the front discouraged viewers from entering. Inside, the walls seemed to be made of gray mud daubed on by the trowel-load. Life-size statues of young men stood in niches around the walls and a colorful fresco brightened the domed ceiling.

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"I guess you'd call it a grotto," she said doubtfully.

"Are there frogs?"

The late-afternoon sun had cast deep shadows across the terraced gardens, but at the back of the alcove, she could make out a Grecian-looking goddess who seemed to be imploring heaven for a favor. At her feet were two young children and a figure that had the legs of a man and the body of a frog. More frog faces peered back at her from around the edges.

"Several," she answered, but by then she heard his sandals clacking on the stone steps as he came down to join her.

He carried a digital camera and his homely face lit up as he took in the details of the grotto.

"Wonderful!" he murmured happily and folded his sticklike body in half to duck under the chain, whereupon he immediately began taking pictures.

Sigrid did not bother to point out that this was probably forbidden. Instead, she asked, "What's the symbolism?"

"Metamorphosis. The goddess is changing them into frogs."

"Why?"

"Go read your Ovid for the long version," he said as he clicked away. "Short version? Leto came to a village spring with her children and asked for a drink of water, but the oafish villagers—those louts there—" He gestured to the statues of young men who menaced the goddess with rocks and sticks. "—refused and then stomped around to muddy the water so that she couldn't drink. At that point, she decided that if they thought mud was so funny, then they could live in it the rest of their lives and she started turning them into frogs. See the terror in that guy's face? He's just realized what's in store for him."

He shot more pictures, then slipped back under the chain and smiled at her. "Good swim?"

"Very," she said with an answering smile and her gray eyes shone almost silver in this light.

Despite high cheekbones and a thin nose, she was not conventionally beautiful and there was nothing sexy about her slender body, yet Buntrock no longer wondered why Oscar Nauman had been so intrigued. Her neck was too long, her mouth too wide, her chin too strong, and her smiles were rare. But when she did smile, it left no doubt as to why his friend had fallen in love with her.

"Hope you don't mind, but I told Jim Olson we'd join them for drinks this evening."

Earlier, and she might have balked. So soon after her swim, she merely said, "What time?"

When they arrived shortly before six, five of Dr. Olson's seven-member group had already gathered in the apartment shared by Hugh Jensen and Darryl Jensen, two wealthy cousins who could have been brothers. Both were small, pudgy men of late middle-age with thinning gray hair, and both were at least six inches shorter

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than Sigrid, who, at five-ten, immediately found a chair and sat down so that she would not tower over them. Not that Darryl Jensen would have minded. He seemed like the effervescent, sweet-tempered yang to his cousin Hugh's waspish and more volatile yin.

He poured her a glass of wine while Hugh Jensen made testy remarks about the lack of window screens. His face was blotched with angry red mosquito bites and he acted as if Dr. Olson were responsible for each and every one.

Jim Olson was a lanky, white-haired six-footer with a broad Midwestern face that made him look more like a dairy farmer than a professor of art history. He looked down at Hugh Jensen now with the same look of puzzlement that a kindly mastiff might give a yipping dachshund.

"Anybody have some insect repellant they could share with Hugh?"

Sigrid had caught a whiff of Off from the two gray-haired women seated nearby, but both shook their heads.

"Sorry, Hugh," he said, then introduced the two newcomers: "Elliott Buntrock, who'll be speaking to us tomorrow about the Severini frescoes, and his friend Sigrid Harald."

He rattled off the names of the others, and Sigrid learned that the man who had spoken to her at the swimming pool was Gene Gallins. As he and the two cousins began to discuss the region's red wines with Buntrock and Olson, the older of the two women smiled at Sigrid. "You probably didn't catch our names. I'm Barbara Rosser. And this is my business partner, Alexa Hayne."

"Partner?"

"Custom framing and art supplies," said Alexa, who was a few years younger and at least three inches shorter. "We own a little shop near Jim's university."

The little shop must do quite well, Sigrid thought. Their linen shirts and slacks clearly came from an upscale boutique, and she was willing to bet that the wide gold cuff Alexa wore and the emerald earrings that sparkled on Barbara's ears were genuine.

Abruptly, Sigrid realized that she was still acting like a police detective sizing up suspects at a murder scene. That was all in the past now, she told herself bleakly. She had never been good at the small talk of social gatherings, but this was to be her world now: art and art lovers. Nevertheless she lowered her voice and said, "The mosquitoes don't bother you?"

The intensity of Alexa Hayne's reply startled her. "Odious little man! If he were dying of thirst, I wouldn't give him a teaspoon of warm spit."

"Now, Alexa," said her partner. "Every tour we've ever taken has had its Hugh Jensens."

"Not rolled into one economy-size package."

"True," Barbara Rosser agreed. "Have you ever toured with a group, Sigrid?"

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"No."

"Well, you're young yet. Jim's are always small and intimate. Most of us either know each other or have mutual friends. At our age, it's nice not to have to worry about hotels or restaurants and he builds in flexibility so that you can putter around a town on your own. If you're dying to see a particular church or museum that isn't on the itinerary, Jim'll make sure you do. This is our third trip with him."

"Spain last year, Germany the year before," said Alexa. "When there are more than nine of us, his son Eric comes along to drive a second van, but our group is smaller than usual this year."

"And fewer people seems to magnify any little personality quirks," said Barbara.

"Pompous, know-it-all rudeness is not a 'little personality quirk,' " Alexa snapped.

Barbara rolled her eyes, but Alexa was already citing chapter and verse of Hugh Jensen's offenses: If leaving for a day trip in the van, he would be the last one out of the hotel. If meeting for the return drive, he would always come strolling up at least fifteen minutes later than the time agreed upon.

"*And* he makes sure he gets the best seat in the van, while Barbara—" Alexa Hayne's black eyes glistened as she looked at her friend.

The older woman put a restraining hand on her partner's arm. "Alexa babies me. My back does give me a little trouble, but because we're always on time, we wind up climbing into the back of the van while Hugh helps himself to a seat in the middle row where it's easier to get in and out."

"So why not take those seats yourselves?" Sigrid asked.

"Because then he moans about how bumpy it is back there and how the air conditioner doesn't reach to the back, or else he makes Jim stop the van so he can take pictures and whoever's sitting in the middle row next to the door has to move to let him out. It's easier to let him have his way."

Barbara gave a rueful smile. "I know, I know. Giving in like that only reinforces his selfishness, but Italy was always my favorite country. We're here to relax and enjoy its beauty and we don't have the time or the energy to stage a confrontation."

"In Venice, though, we missed our one chance at the Tiepolo ceiling because Hugh got us thoroughly lost," Alexa said. "We knew the museum would close for renovations the day after we arrived, but there would have been plenty of time that first afternoon except that he insisted on finding some mask-maker's studio that was supposed to be on the way."

"And we can't say a word because it so distresses Darryl, and he's such a sweetie. Everything Hugh isn't."

"Ah, there you are!" cried the object of their dislike as the last two members of the group entered carrying lumpy packages that they

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deposited with others on a table by the door. "Better late than never."

"You're one to talk," snapped Sabra Lyle, the athletic swimmer who had dived into the pool as Sigrid was leaving it.

To Sigrid's surprise, the man behind her was Taylor Williams, an old friend of her mother's and a professional photographer who had published several well-received coffee-table books on lesser-known artists.

"Sigrid!" he exclaimed. "What on earth are you doing here? How's your mom? Adjusting to married life nicely, I hope?"

Before they could begin to catch up, Hugh offered a tour of the apartment. Part of Montefugoni's charm was that no two apartments were alike. Some had frescoed walls, others had allegorical pictures on the ceiling. Some windows opened onto the rather plain courtyard, others overlooked the hills. The first bedroom was Hugh's, a beautiful large space with a good view. After all that Barbara and Alexa had told her, Sigrid was not surprised to see that the bedroom with only one window and no view belonged to Darryl, who confessed that he hadn't noticed any mosquitoes on that side. ("They never bite me, anyhow.") Two steps up from the common room was a smaller sitting area where more steps led to a locked wooden door, behind which were the Severini frescoes that Elliott was to lecture on tomorrow morning.

"They're marvelous!" Hugh pronounced with proprietary pride, as if he had been extra clever in getting this particular apartment.

Jim Olson frowned. "You've already seen them?"

"Of course! I persuaded the girl at the reception desk to unlock them this afternoon and let me peek in. The colors are as fresh as if they'd been painted yesterday instead of in the 'thirties."

"'Twenties," Olson said, annoyed that Jensen had jumped the gun on the rest of the group. "They were painted in the nineteen-twenties."

"Whenever." He dismissed the correction with a wave of his pudgy fingers. "Is it show-and-tell time?"

The others followed him out to the table in the common room and began to unwrap their packages. Several had shopped for masks at the last minute before leaving Venice and this was their first chance to share and compare.

Gene Gallins unwrapped a glistening beauty, a colorful jester with little golden bells that tinkled when he laid it on the table.

Sabra Lyle's mask was a large leaf enameled in full autumn colors and highlighted with touches of bronze and gold. "I bought these, too," she said, laying three more leaf masks beside the first one. They were identical in shape, but had been left unpainted. "They'll be perfect for my office!"

"Sabra's a landscape designer," Jim told the two newcomers. "She did the gardens at Wexton Grove."

Sigrid smiled politely, having no idea where or what Wexton Grove was; but Elliott looked impressed. Sabra Lyle's suntanned face and sturdy limbs suggested a hands-on gardener, a woman who hefted bags of peat moss or dug up rocks and did whatever else

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went into designing a garden.

"I'll find someone to paint them for the other three seasons," she said.

"Maybe Gallins can do that for you, *too,*" Hugh Jensen suggested with a knowing leer.

Sabra ignored him, but Sigrid saw Gene Gallins's face darken briefly.

Hastily, Alexa said, "What's yours, Darryl?"

"A *zanni*." The comical half-mask began with a harlequin's checkerboard forehead and cheeks and ended in a long pointed nose that stuck straight out at least eight inches. Darryl gave his cousin a sidelong grin full of mischief. "In the classical *Commedia dell'arte,* he's the clown that plays tricks on the main clown."

"How on earth will you get it home without breaking that nose?" someone asked.

"There's a shipping service in Florence," said Olson. "They'll wrap and pack and guarantee safe delivery."

"Mine will need extra insurance," Hugh bragged, setting a canvas tote bag on the table. When he reached inside, though, he came up with only a handful of empty bubble wrap. He turned to his cousin in puzzlement. "Darryl? Did you do something with my mask?"

"Nope. Where did you leave it?"

"In my room." He turned wrathfully to Jim Olson. "Dammit, Jim! You said it was safe to leave the doors unlocked and now it's gone! My three-hundred euro gilded devil mask."

"How appropriate," Alexa murmured in Sigrid's ear.

"I demand that you question all the maids."

"There aren't any maids," Olson reminded him. "Everything's self-service, remember? No maids or bellmen wandering through the stairwells and halls. Besides, the office closed at six-thirty."

"Then all the rooms must be searched at once."

Jaws began to tighten as the others realized he was accusing one of them of theft.

"Calm down, Hugh," Olson said. "Maybe you left it on the van. We'll check when we go to dinner."

Although Jensen continued to grumble, conversation became more general and Taylor Williams cornered Sigrid to talk about his latest project. She rather liked the man, but he did tend to go on and on. Just as she was beginning to wonder if she could catch Elliott's eye and signal the need for rescue, Jim Olson stood and tapped his watch. "Time to go, people. Our dinner reservation's for seven. If you want me to ship your masks, leave them here and I'll pick them up tomorrow. Okay, Darryl?"

"Fine with me." He looked at Hugh, who shrugged and said, "We'll leave the door unlocked, but we're not responsible if anything else goes missing."

As everyone drifted toward the stairs, Olson told Buntrock, "Sorry

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I can't invite you to join us, but we had to reserve three weeks ago."

"That's okay. We're dining here. We heard that the castle chef cooks a mean *risotto con tartufi*."

This was news to Sigrid, but welcome news. After so much chitchat, she was glad to skip an elaborate dinner with the others.

"But stop in for a nightcap later," Buntrock said. "I've picked up a nice Brunello."

It was ten-thirty before Olson tapped at their half-open door. Sigrid glanced up from the book she was reading and Elliott immediately got up to uncork the wine.

"Sorry to be so late," said Olson, "but I had to find some sleeping pills for Hugh and persuade Alexa to share some of her Off with him. Maybe if he gets a good night's sleep, he'll be in a better mood."

"I take it his mask wasn't in the van?" Elliott said sympathetically.

Olson shook his head. "If I'd known he was such a bastard to travel with, I would never have let him come on this trip, but Darryl asked and it never occurred to me that two cousins could be so different."

As Elliott poured their wine, Sigrid said, "What do they do for a living?"

"Nothing: They were trust-fund kids. Their grandmother Nancy was a Reedy before she married their grandfather."

"Reedy?" Elliott's head swung around to peer at him like a curious stork. "As in the Reedy Foundation? Or the Corbett Reedy Investment Group?"

"Corbett Reedy was her father, yes. Even after she set up the Reedy Foundation, there was still enough money to leave her grandsons very generous trust funds. Darryl collects prints and Hugh sits on the boards of various art-related institutions."

He took a deep swallow of wine. "You know how that works, Elliott. Being a director gives any little prick like Jensen the power to step on a lot of toes. Take Gene Gallins. Granted he's not another Grant Wood or Andrew Wyeth, but he has talent and he has taste. Yet he didn't get a show at one of the museums in our area because Hugh convinced them that Gene's nothing more than a Sunday painter."

"Gene Gallins and Sabra Lyle," Sigrid said. "Are they sleeping together?"

Jim promptly strangled on his wine and Elliott jumped up to pound on his back.

"How on earth do you know that?" Olson gasped when he could speak again.

She shrugged. "The way he looked at her in the pool. And his reaction to something Jensen said tonight."

"They've been very discreet." Jim coughed again and wiped his eyes with the napkin she handed him. "I make it a point not to notice things like that, but Sabra did pay the extra supplement so that she wouldn't have to share a room."

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"So why does Alexa hate him so much?" Sigrid persisted. "Surely it's not just because he's never on time or hogs the best seat on the van."

Olson looked to Buntrock for help.

"Sorry, Jim," Elliott said. "What can I say? She used to be a cop."

"I'm sorry, too," Olson said. "But it's not something I can discuss and I'd really appreciate it if you wouldn't speculate about it to the others."

Sigrid regarded him a long moment, then nodded acquiescence.

Their talk soon turned to reminiscences of bygone years and people Sigrid had never met: "You saw where *The Loaded Brush* ran a long interview with Lou Brown?" and "What's happening with Tang Cai?"

"He lucked into a group show at the Penelope Gallery this fall," Elliott said. Sigrid tried to look interested as they discussed whether the Chinese artist's visa would expire before he could establish a name for himself in the States.

"What about that kid who did those intelligent lithographs? Lynn Palmour? What's she up to these days?"

Olson looked down into his glass and gently swirled the wine. "She took an overdose last month."

"*What?* Why?"

"Remember how emotionally fragile she was? Her only brother was killed in a car crash over the holidays and then the one-woman show she was promised fell through."

Elliott shook his head. "What a waste. She was a damn fine artist with a lot of potential."

"Yeah," Olson said and held out his glass for a refill.

As their talk turned to tomorrow's schedule, Sigrid quit trying to suppress her yawns and announced that she was going to bed.

Even with unscreened windows, Sigrid slept unmolested by mosquitoes and emerged from her bedroom rested and refreshed next day. After an early swim in the deserted pool, she had intended to go straight back to the apartment, but the morning was so beautiful and the surroundings so peaceful that she paused in front of the grotto and looked out over the Tuscan landscape. In the far distance, a tractor labored up and down the steep hillside through row after row of grapevines. Nearer to the castle grounds were groves of greenish gray trees that Elliott had identified as olives. High overhead, swallows darted in and out of mud nests beneath the eaves of the castle and lacy mounds of red and pink geraniums tumbled over the edge of the terrace above.

Despite the emotional undercurrents swirling around last night, it was nothing to do with her and she was glad that Elliott had insisted on their coming. The pool was worth putting up with a few social niceties. Today was Friday. She would go hear him speak about those frescoes, then take herself back to the pool or hole up in their apartment with a book. On Monday they would return to Florence, retrieve the paintings, and, with a little luck, be back on

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a plane to New York by Tuesday.

As she passed the grotto, something caught her eye. She stopped short, looked closer, and almost laughed out loud. She had missed it coming down, but now she saw that one of the statues wore a gilded devil mask and leered at Leto with golden malevolence.

Smiling to herself, Sigrid climbed the steps and crossed the loggia to her stairwell, where the aroma of bacon drifted down to meet her.

"Just in time," Elliott said, turning from the stovetop. "Come see how orange these egg yolks are! Laid by real free-range chickens, eating real grass."

Suddenly ravenous, Sigrid dutifully admired them, then quickly changed into dry clothes. Elliott filled their plates with buttered toast, Italian bacon, and scrambled eggs, and as they ate, she told him about seeing Hugh Jensen's mask on one of the grotto statues. "Wonder who put it there?"

"My money's on Darryl. He had the best chance, and Jim says he has a quirky sense of humor."

Sigrid smiled, remembering the mischievous grin Darryl had given Hugh while explaining what the *zanni* mask signified.

At ten o'clock, Sigrid and Elliott met Jim Olson in the large reception office off the main loggia. Several mismatched office desks had been arranged in a reverse L and castle business was conducted from the long side. The short side held a second computer for guests who could not bear to go too long without Internet access. The small staff doubled as needed around the castle and the attractive young woman on duty that morning was casually dressed in serviceable jeans and tank top. She plucked a large key from one of the pigeonholes on the rack behind her. It was five or six inches long and made of iron.

Olson hefted it in his hand. "It always feels weird to hold a key that the Sitwells must have used."

"Sitwells?" asked Sigrid, who owned a large collection of poetry. "Edith Sitwell?"

"Didn't you know?" said Elliott. "Her father bought the castle around nineteen ten. He's the one who commissioned the Severini frescoes. There are stories that her brothers wanted Picasso, but the old man had met and liked Severini and since it was his money . . ."

A few minutes later, he was repeating the same words to the group who had gathered in the Jensen apartment. Sigrid noticed that Hugh's *diavolo* mask was now on the table by the entrance hall, although nothing was said about it while Elliott finished his introductory remarks. "If Picasso had taken the commission, it would have no doubt been a cubist marvel, but by nineteen twenty-two, Severini had abandoned futurism, so now we get *this!*"

He turned the iron key in the plain wooden door and threw it open with a dramatic flourish. As the others crowded in behind him, their admiration for the bright and colorful masked harlequins that cov-

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ered the walls of the small gallery quickly changed to laughter.

At the end of the room, Darryl Jensen lounged on the floor, his back against the wall. He wore the long-nosed mask he had bought in Venice and his dark blue pajamas that echoed the pantaloons in the frescoes.

"How funny, Darryl!" said Alexa Hayne. "You look as if you could just reach up and take some fruit from that painted bowl."

"You idiot," Hugh said, as if annoyed that his cousin had thought of the joke first. "Here, let me give you a hand up."

He reached for Darryl's hand, but there was no response.

"Darryl? Quit clowning."

"What's wrong?" someone cried as he slumped over. "Is he hurt?"

Sigrid pushed past the babbling art lovers and quickly knelt to feel for the man's pulse.

"Everybody out," she said. "Now!"

There was such authority in her voice that even Hugh obeyed.

"Is he dead?" Jim Olson asked, his face ashen.

"Yes," she said succinctly.

To Sigrid's bemusement, three separate police authorities responded to the call. First came the municipal officers, followed by the state and provincial.

It was almost one o'clock before they sorted out who had jurisdiction and Sigrid was summoned to a room off the castle's courtyard.

"My apologies for not seeing you sooner, Miss Harald." The big man in a rumpled brown suit spoke with a distinct English accent. "I'm Inspector Giordano of the state police." He introduced his associates, invited her to be seated at the table he was using as a desk, and looked at her doubtfully. "I'm told you're a police detective yourself? In New York?"

"I resigned several months ago, Inspector."

"But you did handle homicides?"

"Yes."

He gave a slight smile of approval. "Not one to waste words, are you? Good. Please describe the events you witnessed this morning."

When she had finished telling him everything she had seen, including the devil mask on one of the grotto statues, he said, "Who killed him, Miss Harald?"

Sigrid shook her head. "I met all these people for the first time last evening."

"Nevertheless . . . ?"

"I'm sorry. I've formed no opinions."

"No?"

"No," she said firmly and asked a question of her own. "Was he killed in Hugh's bed?"

She saw him struggle with the decision as to whether she should be told anything, then he shrugged, as if realizing that she proba-

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bly knew almost as much as he, or soon would.

"Yes. We found signs on the pillowcase that he was smothered facedown while his arms were held immobile by the covers."

"So no DNA under his fingernails," Sigrid murmured, almost to herself. "Hugh blames himself. He made Darryl switch rooms because of the mosquitoes. You do realize that Hugh believes he was the killer's target?"

"So he has told us," the inspector said drily. "Several times. With increasing agitation. He's demanding that we let him leave before the killer succeeds. You observed these people last night. Which do you think was the intended victim?"

"Probably Hugh. We met in their apartment before dinner last evening and were given a tour of the place, so everyone knew which bedroom was which. Darryl was well liked, while Hugh irritated nearly everyone. But how did the killer get Darryl's body into the Severini gallery? I saw three other doors. One opens onto a blank wall, the others were locked with thumb bolts from the inside. The receptionist says there's only one key and the office is locked at six-thirty, well before everyone left for dinner."

"Did she also say that she found the key hanging on the doorknob of the office when she returned this morning?"

"The killer took it before the office was locked last night and she didn't notice?"

"So she says."

Sigrid nodded thoughtfully. "When I checked my e-mail this morning, I was left alone in the office for several minutes. The receptionist seems to run all over the castle. I assume the others were in and out of the office yesterday?"

"All except Mrs. Barbara Rosser. She doesn't use the Internet, but—" He consulted the notes he had taken earlier. "—Mrs. Lyle, Mrs. Hayne, and Mr. Gallins were there when Mr. Hugh Jensen asked to see the frescoes. They would have seen where the key was kept and could have mentioned it to the others. And Dr. Olson, of course, has stayed here before. It's a very distinctive key. Easy to spot. So I ask you again, Miss Harald. Who wanted Hugh Jensen dead?"

Again, Sigrid told him she could not say. Giordano let out a frustrated breath and gave a dismissive nod of his head. "Very well. Thank you for your help."

"I wish I could have helped you more," she said, suddenly homesick for the familiar routine of police work that had been taken from her.

The big rumpled man behind the desk cocked his head as if understanding her hesitation. "Was it easy to walk away from the job?"

"No."

"You have no official standing here," he warned her.

"I know."

"But you will ask questions?"

"Probably."

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"And you will listen?"

"I usually do."

"Bene," he said, sounding Italian for the first time.

Trying to form a logical theory, Sigrid crossed the courtyard and almost bumped into Dr. Olson.

"Could I talk to you a minute?" she asked.

"Sure."

Sunlight silvered his white hair as he followed her out to a table on the terrace where they could talk undisturbed, almost hidden by several huge tubs of red geraniums. Unfamiliar birds twittered in the tall cypress trees and the golden Tuscan light only underlined how far from New York and her past life she now was.

"Sorry," Olson said, smothering a yawn. "Too much wine last night and now all this . . ."

Sigrid came straight to the point. "Is Barbara Rosser dying?"

He stared at her in disbelief. "How the hell—? Are you psychic or something?"

"No. Just an ex-cop. I listen to people. Not only to what they say, but what they don't say. Alexa almost blurted it out to me last night, but Barbara stopped her. Then Barbara herself spoke of how Italy was always her favorite country. *Was,* not *is.* As if she never expected to come back."

Olson sighed. "You're right. This is her farewell trip. She decided to see Italy one last time rather than do another round of chemo and radiation. She didn't want anyone else to know and made me promise that I wouldn't treat her any differently from the rest. But I swear to God, I wanted to knock Hugh Jensen into the middle of next week when he made her miss seeing that Tiepolo ceiling in Venice."

"I imagine Alexa wanted to herself," Sigrid said and sat back to watch the wheels begin to turn.

"No," he said at last. "Darryl was a small man but Alexa's a smaller woman. She couldn't have carried him up those stairs."

"But Sabra Lyle could. If Hugh was a threat to her marriage . . ."

"Sabra's divorced. Gene's the married one. He sells an occasional picture, but the only way he can afford to paint full time is because of his wife's money."

"I thought Sabra was a successful landscape designer."

"She is. That doesn't mean she wants to support him." He gave a wry smile. "So you're not infallible, after all."

"What do you mean?"

"Sabra's toured with me before. Gallins is merely this tour's flavor of the month. There was someone different last year, there'll be someone different next year. Adds a little spice to her vacations. You look shocked."

Amused, Sigrid shook her head. "No. Surprised maybe, but not shocked. All the same, Gallins does have a grudge against Hugh for

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blackballing him with a museum, right?"

"A grudge, yes. But enough to kill? I don't think so."

"What about Taylor Williams? He have any run-ins with Hugh?"

"No more than any of the others. Hugh may have made some slighting remarks about how lightweight coffee-table books can be, but that's all I've heard." He stood up wearily. "I have to make some more phone calls. The others are having lunch downstairs if you want to join them."

"Thanks," she said, "but I'm not hungry."

She watched him disappear down the sunlit stone staircase, then sat and thought about all the things she had seen, all she had heard, and all she had been told. Olson said he had given Hugh two sleeping pills. Assuming Hugh actually took them, anyone could have killed Darryl without waking his cousin.

She looked at her watch. Italian time was five or six hours ahead of New York so her attorney would not be at the office this early, but her e-mail would be waiting when he arrived.

As afternoon shadows deepened across the ancient stone courtyard, Inspector Giordano called them together again. "We have now questioned everyone in the castle," he told them in his incongruous English accent.

Nervous glances were exchanged and a querulous Hugh Jensen broke the silence. "My God, man! Don't play Hercule Poirot with us. If you know who killed Darryl, spit it out!"

"Mrs. Hayne," Giordano said gently. "Is there anything you want to tell me?"

Alexa Hayne's eyes were frightened. "N-No, I don't think so."

"Two young Australian women were in the lower garden last evening. They saw you and Mr. Darryl Jensen."

"Oh," she said in a small voice. "Very well, Inspector. Yes, I helped Darryl put Hugh's mask on that statue."

"What?" said Hugh.

"It was a joke, Hugh. He said you were acting just like those selfish men who wouldn't let the goddess drink—muddying the trip like they were muddying the water. He couldn't understand why you were behaving so badly."

Jensen started to speak, then clamped his mouth shut and sat back, shaking his head.

"Mr. Jensen, do any of these people benefit by your death?"

"Benefit?" he asked bitterly. "Other than getting rid of the person who seems to have wrecked this tour? I can't believe Darryl hated me that much."

"He didn't hate you," Alexa said. "He just thought you were too full of yourself and he wanted to tease you a little."

"You and your cousin," said Giordano. "You say that you both had trusts from your grandmother. Who inherits if you die?"

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"As I told you this morning, the Reedy Foundation gets it. Same for Darryl. After our deaths, the trusts dissolve and the principal returns to the foundation." He glared at the others. "No, Inspector. Whoever wants me dead, it's not for my money."

"No? What about your cousin's money?" After the long hot June day, Giordano's brown suit was a mass of untidy wrinkles. He drank from a liter-sized bottle of cold water, then unfolded a sheet of typescript. "Miss Harald received this message from her attorney. According to his discreet inquiries, the terms of your grandmother's trust are not quite as you would have me believe."

"What?" He glared at both of them. "I don't know what you're talking about. The terms are exactly as I told you."

"After your deaths, the principal does indeed revert to the foundation," Giordano said. "Both your deaths. Whoever survives gets the interest from both trusts until his death. With him gone—"

As Giordano's words sank in, Hugh bristled indignantly. *"Me?* You're accusing *me?* You're crazy! We were like brothers." His angry denials dwindled into sudden sobs. "Brothers," he whimpered.

"Jacob and Esau were brothers, yet Jacob stole Esau's inheritance," Giordano said implacably. "You had the motive. You had the opportunity." He stood up and towered over the small man. "I must ask you to come with us, Mr. Jensen."

Protesting his innocence, Hugh Jensen was led away. While the others dispersed in stunned dismay, Jim Olson left to call the American consulate in Florence and Sigrid walked across the courtyard with Inspector Giordano. At the castle's gate, he paused to thank her for her help.

"You would have reached the same conclusion without me," Sigrid said.

"Probably," he agreed complacently. "His was the only real motive. He was the one who conveniently gave you a tour of the apartment and then made his cousin change bedrooms. He stole the key earlier and he had the whole night to set that stage."

"Why now, though?" she wondered aloud.

"Who knows the logic of a killer? I myself think that he began to plan this murder when Darryl bought that cheap mask in Venice. It could have been the final straw in a camel-load of resentment."

"The *zanni?*"

He nodded. "From the *Commedia dell'arte.* Everyone says Darryl Jensen had a trickster sense of humor. Maybe that mask was a way of telling his cousin that he might be the subordinate clown, but that he—Hugh Jensen—was the greater clown and bigger fool." Inspector Giordano took her hand. "So! *La commedia è finita,"* he said; and even though she did not speak Italian, Sigrid needed no translation.

Swallows and bats swooped and soared together in the cool evening air as twilight settled across the beautiful Tuscan landscape and

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the first bright stars pricked through the dark blue sky overhead. The others had gone downstairs to the castle's outdoor restaurant, but Elliott and Sigrid remained seated with their wine at one of the terrace tables to keep Jim Olson company.

"Poor Darryl," Olson said again. It had been a long tiring day and he looked almost haggard with fatigue. "Will Hugh be convicted, do you think?"

Sigrid turned the stem of her wineglass in her slender fingers. "Realistically?" she said at last. "I seriously doubt it. The evidence is all circumstantial and the Reedy Foundation will surely come to his rescue with extradition papers and clever attorneys."

"So he not only gets off," Olson said bleakly, "he gets to profit by Darryl's death."

"He may get off in court," Sigrid said, turning her wineglass more slowly now, "but I imagine public opinion will find him guilty."

"She's right," said Elliott. "He'll be asked to resign from all the boards he sits on now, and decent people will shun him. So don't worry, Jim. He'll be punished for his sins."

Sigrid carefully set her glass atop the wrought-iron table. "Unless, of course, you decide to confess."

Both men stared at her.

"He's stayed here before, Elliott. He knows where the key is kept and how the office is often left unattended. He knew where to place the body that he thought was Hugh's before he realized he'd killed the wrong cousin."

Elliott's protest died in his throat when he saw the guilt and shame on his friend's face. "You, Jim? Why?"

"The woman you asked about last night," Sigrid told him. "The suicide."

"Lynn Palmour?" Elliott was shocked. "Was it Jensen that blocked her one-man show?"

"At a time when she was still shattered by her brother's death." Olson's voice was heavy with grief. "Then he told her he'd get it reinstated if she'd have sex with him. She was like the daughter I never had and that bastard killed her, Elliott. He killed that sweet kid as surely as if he'd given her the overdose himself. I could say he killed Darryl, too, making him change bedrooms like that, but . . ." He buried his head in his hands. "God help me."

Distressed, Elliott turned to Sigrid.

She pushed back her chair and stood up. Without a confession, there was no more evidence against Olson than there was against Jensen. Less, even. And as Inspector Giordano had reminded her, she had no official standing here.

"Sigrid?"

She took a deep breath and shook her head. "I'm not a cop anymore, remember? Whatever happens is up to him," she said. "Not me." ●

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The Boy Who Cried Wolfe

by Loren D. Estleman

The bomb dropped while I was card-indexing Claudius Lyon's latest contribution to horticultural science, a hybrid tomato plant that comprised all the disadvantages of a beefsteak and none of the advantages of a roma, and Lyon, foundering up to his chins, as usual, behind his preposterously enormous desk, was pretending to read *The Portable Schopenhauer*. It was actually Carolyn Keene's *The Clue of the Dancing Puppet* inside the drab dust jacket, and he'd read it twice before in my tenure.

"Arnie," he said, "how long have you been working for me?"

I scowled at my typewriter, an IBM Selectric so sensitive it anticipates my mistakes and makes them for me. "Three years, two months, fifteen days, eleven minutes, and twenty-nine seconds."

"How much do you estimate you've embezzled from me during that period?"

My fingers slipped. A Gordian knot of keys thudded against the card on the platen.

He looked up from his book with his Gerber-baby smile. "I am a genius, but not an absent-minded one. I call my bank from time to time and occasionally balance my checkbook. When you deposit the royalties from NASA on my father's pressure-cooker gasket patent, you round down the amount and palm the rest. Absent a tedious study of the actual figures, I can arrive at a reasonable estimate by multiplying your time in my employ by the average sum pilfered.

Mystery without murder features in Loren D. Estleman's Claudius Lyon series. Lyon's first outing (*EQMM* June 2008) involved apparent fraud in the literary world; this time out he takes a case for a boy in search of his father. But Mr. Estleman has another side. His new hard-boiled thriller, *Gas City*, got starred reviews from *PW*, *Booklist*, and *Kirkus*, and *Entertainment Weekly* said: "He's been called the heir to Chandler—and it's easy to see why." †

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The product would support a modest harem."

"Well, it was a lark while it flew," I said finally. "Is it federal or local? I hear they put out a spread in the U.S. prisons. Anything beats mac-and-cheese Wednesday in Sing Sing."

"There's no need for bravado. I don't intend to pursue charges. With whom would I replace you? There is only one Arnie Woodbine, and Archie Goodwin is permanently off the market. I must make the best of my knockoff. Dock yourself ten dollars a week until the account is even."

"But that'll take—"

"Six years, one month, twelve days, five hours, and thirty-two minutes. Consider it a long-term contract, which you'd be wise not to break." He returned to his reading.

In case anything about the foregoing seems familiar—not counting the larceny—now is a good time to point out that "Claudius Lyon" is an invention. The man who uses the name has remodeled his life to conform to his hero's, Nero Wolfe of Manhattan, who raises orchids, employs a world-class chef, and solves mysteries brought to him by baffled clients. Lyon's own limitations have forced compromises: He grows tomatoes, eats kosher most of the time because that's all his chef Gus knows how to cook, and depends upon me, the poor man's Archie Goodwin (Wolfe's legman and hectoring angel), for mundane errands.

He's as fat as Wolfe but much shorter, and when he climbs into the big chair behind his desk he looks like Tweedledum with his legs swinging free. Not having any prior experience with geniuses, I don't know if he is one, but he's a damn clever little butterball who hasn't forgotten a thing he's learned from the thousands of whodunits he's read. I've seen him take more than his share of pratfalls, but I've never seen him stumped.

Well, I had nothing better to do for the next six years, one month, etc., and I'd been to prison and found it not up to my standards, so I didn't complain about the pay cut; instead I worked out an arrangement with Gus to buy generic lox and split the price difference. Lyon hasn't Wolfe's palate and wouldn't know the gourmet brand from Karl's Kut-Rate Kippers. It was a stingy little scam compared to the one I'd had going, even when I extended it to include gristly corned beef and day-old bagels, but it would do until something better came along. If you're the type who can live life on the level without gnawing your nails down to the knuckle, congratulations, and keep it to yourself. Without a dash of pepper the stew's just too flat.

The reason for all this chatter is, it explains how the principal resident of the townhouse at 700 Avenue J, Flatbush, put his chubby little gray cells to work on the problem of William Thew.

Gus's main motivator in our conspiracy was the convenience of not having to take the crosstown bus to the snooty little market

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that sold the best kosher in the five boroughs; the cheap stuff was available on the corner, and it delivered. I happened to answer the doorbell the day the pushy delivery boy showed up lugging a paper sack bigger than he was. I had to part a bunch of celery to see his pinched little face under the obligatory backward baseball cap.

"Here, kid." I traded him a buck for the sack.

"My name's Jasper, not kid. Jasper Hull."

"The hell you say. You got that from an eighty-six-year-old man's obituary in the *Daily News.*"

"It's Jasper just the same. I want to see Lyon."

"What's the matter, I don't tip big enough?"

"I got a case for him. He's a detective, ain't he? That's what it says in the Yellow Pages."

"It doesn't either. I wrote the ad. It says he provides answers to questions."

"If I got it that way I'd've took my tip and went. I seen all the fortunetellers I want to. They charge you up front and tell you a lot of bogus stuff that could mean anything."

" 'Satisfaction guaranteed.' The ad says that too."

"Okay. Here." He held up the buck I'd given him.

"What's that for?"

"It's a what-do-you-call-it, a retainer."

I grinned. "Nice try, kid. Tell Captain Stoddard he's in violation of the child labor laws." I started to push the door shut, but damn if he didn't insert his wiry little body into the space. It was either squash him or stop. I considered the point and decided against squashing. It's hell on the finish.

I said, "You'd think Fraud would have enough to keep it busy in a town this size without setting traps for one little fat guy with schizophrenic tendencies, but a month doesn't go by without the cop in charge trying to trick Lyon into accepting payment and busting him for practicing private investigation without a license. Recruiting a kid's bad enough; a dollar's an insult to his intelligence. A fiver's plenty cute given the inflationary index. I'm surprised Stoddard didn't knock out a front tooth and give you a scruffy mutt from the pound."

"How good can he be if he don't charge?"

"So good he doesn't need your dirty buck."

"A minute ago it was your dirty buck." He stuck it in his jeans pocket. "I don't like cops, either. They say they're there to help, but all they do is write stuff down and shove it in a drawer. The detective agencies I tried won't listen to nobody but an adult. I seen Lyon's name in the listing, and when this order came in where I work, I thought I'd take another shot."

"Shot at what?"

"Finding my father."

"Wipe your feet, kid." I opened the door wide.

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Lyon squeaked bloody murder when I told him I'd parked a ten-year-old boy in the front room. To begin with, he doesn't trust any creature his own size, and as for childhood, he thinks it's a conspiracy to break valuable objects and make doorknobs sticky, which is a favorite phobia of his. He'd just come down from the plant room and hugged to his chest the specimen of the day in its fragile clay pot. "Get rid of him and spray Lysol on anything he might have touched. Children are the main carriers of most of the diseases on this planet."

"Just this morning you were whining about having nothing to do. Now you want to shoo away work."

"I'm not a missing-persons bureau. Why should I be made to suffer because some preadolescent was careless enough to misplace his sire?"

"You don't know suffering. Try sitting around listening to you sigh and moan and cheat on crossword puzzles."

"I never cheat. Whoever designs them needs a refresher course in basic vocabulary. 'Impact' as a verb. Phooey!"

"I'll bring the kid in. You want me to put down papers?"

"Remain standing, and be prepared to hurl yourself between us the moment he starts to sneeze."

Jasper Hull turned the big globe with a palm in passing; Lyon sucked in air through his nostrils. The kid stopped in front of the desk.

"You're fat."

"And you have no pubic hair. Please remove your cap. The room is heated sufficiently and the roof doesn't leak."

He uncovered a shock of red hair and hopped up onto the orange leather chair. "My mother's dead. I live with my aunt. She don't know I'm here. She says if my father was worth looking for he wouldn't have to be looked for."

"She has a point, though the syntax is dubious logically. Why do you want to find him?"

"Aunt Jill's okay, but I'm sick of living with girls. My father left before I was born. I'm not sure my mother even knew his name." He lifted his chin.

"That's unfortunate. Without a name or a description, there's no place to start."

"He's a tall, skinny redhead and his name's William Thew."

I was taking notes, poised as ordered to throw myself into the bacterial breach if necessary. "That's T-H-E-W?"

"I don't know. He didn't spell it out."

Lyon said, "You stated he left before you were born. When did you meet?"

"The day my mother died, in Brooklyn General Hospital."

Kids are natural reporters; it's only when they grow up that they learn to digress and embellish. His mother had been hit by a truck

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in a crosswalk near their apartment six months ago and died a few days later without regaining consciousness. That day, Jasper and his aunt got off the hospital elevator just as the man he'd described was leaving his mother's room. The man, who was about thirty, was wearing a heavy overcoat over faded jeans and was obviously not a hospital employee. Asked if he'd come to visit the patient, he'd said yes. When the aunt asked who he was, he'd hesitated, turned toward a window in the corridor, then turned back and said, "William Thew."

"How do you know my sister?"

"We, uh, went to school together."

"Is she awake?"

"No."

"It was very kind of you to come. Where can I contact you in case her condition changes?"

He gave her a phone number, then looked at his watch and said he had to get back to work. The elevator was open, and as he stepped inside, Jasper spoke up. "What kind of work?"

"I'm an artist." The doors slid shut and he descended.

"Did you have any contact after that?" Lyon asked.

"No. After Mom died, Aunt Jill tried the number, but it was phony. We looked for him at the funeral. He didn't show."

"How did he know your mother was in the hospital?"

"The accident was in the paper. He must've read about it."

"Did either of you ask at the nurses' station if he'd stopped there to find out what room she was in?"

"My aunt did, but you know what those places are like, nurses coming and going all the time. Nobody remembered him."

"What makes you think he's your father?"

"Well, we both have red hair."

"Ten percent of the population does."

"I just know, okay?"

"Not okay. Mr. Woodbine informed you I'm not a fortuneteller, and I don't believe you are one either."

"Aunt Jill thinks I'm nuts, too. Gimme a pencil and a piece of paper."

Lyon looked at me. I got a sheet of stationery out of my desk and a Cross pen and gave them to the kid. He folded the paper into a stiff square, stuck his tongue out the corner of his mouth, and scribbled, stopping a couple of times to look up at Lyon. He handed back the sheet, blank side up. I passed it to Lyon, who glanced at it and gave it back to me. I grinned. In a few strokes the kid had captured his basketball-shaped head and that sourpuss expression he wears when he thinks he's being poker-faced. Jasper Hull had a future as a cartoonist.

"He said he's an artist," Jasper said. "My mother couldn't draw a straight line and neither can my aunt. Where'd I get it if not from him?"

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"Young man, Shakespeare's father was once fined for maintaining a dungheap in his front yard. His son wrote *Hamlet*. Gus!"

The kid jumped, but I was used to that bellow. The major-domo in the rusty cutaway coat hobbled in with a cream soda and left as Lyon pried off the cap, swigged, and burped. Then he started digging in his ear with a finger. That caught me off guard. I hadn't thought the conversation had provided anything to bother waking up his cortex over.

He withdrew the finger. "Do you remember the number of your mother's room at Brooklyn General?"

"Six-oh-eight, why?"

"You came here seeking the services of a detective, not lessons in the practice of the craft. Please leave a number where you can be reached with Mr. Woodbine."

"Yeah, I bet he calls."

I showed him out and went back to the office, where Lyon was studying the sketch. "The tough little nut stole my pen," I said, "but that's all right. He sure can draw."

"Caricature is the lowest form of humor. Dispose of it."

I put it in my breast pocket. I hoped I could find a frame the right size.

"I want you to take the digital camera and photograph the view from all the windows between room six-oh-eight and the elevator in Brooklyn General," he said. "Shoot every angle."

"They'll think I'm a terrorist."

"Phooey. 'Hospital security' is a contradiction in terms. If he hadn't the ill fortune to encounter Jasper Hull and his aunt, William Thew would have been in and out like a ghost."

"Why ill fortune; child support?"

"Don't put the horse before the cart."

"I think you're supposed to."

"Pre-Industrial Age semantics. He hoards personal data as if it were gold, and I am an intellectual Jesse James. When he ran into them he wandered down my stagecoach road."

I got the camera out of the safe. "I'll hang on to a shot just to get one of you in the saddle. Tabloids'll eat it up."

I didn't ask what was back of the assignment; he'd just have given me the speech about cadging lessons in the practice of the craft. I picked a quiet time during visiting hours and took thirty shots. There was just the one window in the corridor between 608 and the elevator, so it didn't take long, and I finished just before an orderly got off on that floor pushing his squeaky cart. I boarded the elevator with the camera tucked under my coat and found a one-hour place on Utica.

Ansel Adams wouldn't have gotten up to look at my portfolio: cars in the parking lot, a brick hardware building with some old advertising on it, an ancient tenement coming down, a new high-rise going up, and an enterprising vendor selling flowers from a side-

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walk stand, a bane to the competition in the gift shop downstairs. But Lyon gave each print the close attention of a Renaissance expert studying a cache of Rembrandt drawings. Some he slid to one side after thirty seconds of scrutiny, others he bent over at his desk with a heavy brass-handled magnifying glass the size of a hand mirror in his fist. He kept returning to one in particular, then sat back and laid aside the glass.

"Tell me what you think."

I looked at it. It was one of the shots in which the old hardware building featured prominently. "Great composition. I owe it all to a guy I met doing a year and a day for taking pictures of naked ladies in a tanning parlor."

"The composition is hideous, but I didn't send you out on behalf of *Architectural Digest.* The focus is good. The leaves having fallen from the trees this time of year gave you a better perspective on the billboard than would have been possible six months ago, when Jasper Hull and his aunt visited his mother in the hospital."

It was painted directly on the brick wall of the hardware store, possibly with the very product it advertised.

" 'It Covers the World,' " I read. "And sure enough, there it is dumping out of a bucket all over Terra Firma, one coat. I bet Sherwin-Williams has been using that slogan for a hundred years."

Lyon waited for more, then sighed, drew a Sharpie from a squat Toby mug of Napoleon on his desk, and spent another minute bent over the picture. When he sat back, I saw that Jasper Hull had nothing on Claudius Lyon in the department of freehand art. He'd sketched in a close approximation of bunches of maple leaves on the naked tree branches that had stood between the camera and its subject.

But it wasn't his technique that drew a long low whistle from me; much to the annoyance of Lyon, who when he condescends to purse his lips and blow, manages only a dry whoosh. His expression curdled further. "Indeed. Have we any friendly contacts on the police force?"

"Stoddard's as friendly as it gets, and you know where he'd admire to put his size thirteen."

I'm not without resources, however, and got a buddy on the staff of *The Habitual Handicapper* to call in a couple of markers in Records and Information. When he checked in, Lyon eavesdropped on the extension. "Encouraging," he said when we hung up; which, coming from him, is a rave. "Please telephone young Mr. Hull and arrange an appointment."

"Mr. Woodbine, I take it? I'm Jillian Hull."

Next to a full pardon from the governor, it was the nicest surprise I could have hoped to find on the doorstep. She was on the bright side of thirty, a honey of a honey blonde with her hair pinned back loosely behind cute little ears and blue eyes as big as coat buttons.

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She came up to my shoulder and I could've lifted her in one hand, but I didn't chance it. She wasn't smiling.

Neither was Jasper, slumped next to her with his fists in his pockets. "She was there when you called. She made me tell."

"My nephew's been through a traumatic time, Mr. Woodbine. Humoring him is one thing, taking advantage of his fantasies in a season of mourning quite another. It may even be criminal."

I leered; Goodwin grins, but my mouth don't work that way. The suit she wore fit her too well here and there to back up her pique. "Pardon my not responding, but it wouldn't be hospitable to make you go through it all again for Lyon. He's the criminal in charge. I'm just the henchman."

"Take me to him, please."

It being a few minutes short of evening business hours, I trotted upstairs and gave him the news in the plant room. He was up to his elbows in sheep manure, but it wasn't enough of a distraction to keep him from blushing. Nero Wolfe only distrusts the female sex; Claudius Lyon is terrified of it. "Tell her she isn't invited and turn her out."

"She'd take Jasper with her. He's a minor, she's his guardian. You'd be giving up your curtain-closer."

He forgot himself and rubbed his nose, leaving a stain. The whole world was going to stink now. "Seat her on the sofa, out of my direct line of sight."

"She already took the orange chair."

"Sweet Mr. Moto! They have the rest of the world; why must they lay siege to my one little corner?"

The doorbell rang. I went downstairs and took a slant through the window by the door. The angular figure perched on the stoop sent me bounding back up to the plant room. "It's Captain Stoddard."

Lyon, disinfecting himself at the sink, didn't blush this time; he whitened a shade. Authority of any kind always took the wind out of him. Me, too, but my reasons are well known. Maybe his old man had caught him filching candy when he was little and had a cop friend put him in the clink to teach him a lesson. They say that's how Hitchcock got started. "Word must have reached him of our inquiries," he squeaked. "Don't answer!"

"He'll just come back madder."

The ringing stopped and the banging started. Lyon bobbed his head, washing his hands furiously. "I suppose we must let him sit in, for the sake of the door."

"Got you, Woodbine," greeted Stoddard when I opened up. "Lyon too. Using police services for private business."

"Business involves statements and receipts and scratches in a ledger. This is a hobby. And police records are public property."

I'd cribbed the speech from Lyon. There was more to it, but a steel fist shot out of a coat sleeve and took up the slack in my windpipe.

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I squeaked—plagiarizing again from the boss.

I never found out how far he intended to take it, because Jillian and Jasper Hull came out of the office to see what all the noise was about. When Stoddard saw them his eyes returned to their sockets and he let go.

When I finished coughing I made introductions and told everyone what he needed to know to that point. We went into the office, where the captain commandeered the orange chair, leaving two of the smaller green ones for the other guests.

Promptly on the hour, the building shook from the elevator rattling in the shaft, but the effect of the maestro's big entrance was spoiled when it got stuck between the second and first floors. This had happened before, and there was only one way to jar it back into operation. He was loath to do it with an audience. However, after a moment of mulling, the thudding began; pictures danced on the walls, and anyone with half an imagination could picture the chunky little passenger jumping up and down in the car. Finally the mechanism kicked back in with a dry chuckle and the cage settled to ground level. Lyon emerged, vest, lapels, and pocket handkerchief in perfect alignment, but his face as red as the fruit of the *Lycopersicum esculentum* in the pot he held in both hands.

Jasper stifled a snort as the host made his dignified waddle to his chair; it was the first time I'd seen the little squirt behave like a normal child.

When he was seated, Lyon nodded to each visitor, making eye contact with none. "Thank you for coming. The presence of Ms. Hull and Mr. Stoddard is an unexpected pleasure, however uninvited."

The two thus named started to talk at the same time. Stoddard found his manners in some cluttered corner and shut his mouth. Jillian Hull said, "I'm glad the police are here. It will make it easier to prefer charges against you for swindling a minor."

"Mr. Stoddard investigates fraud, which as he can tell you requires an exchange of money. I'm sure young Master Hull will confirm that I've declined compensation of any kind."

Stoddard thumped the arm of his chair with a horned palm. "You don't have to, as long as you can get the police to do your work for free."

Lyon swallowed, stifling a squeak. "Hardly free. I pay confiscatory taxes that contribute in no small measure to your department's budget. The information I obtained there is community property, and was connected only indirectly to my investigation. I conducted it merely to confirm my suspicions. Mr. Woodbine?"

I got up from my desk and handed Jasper the fax we'd received that day from Brooklyn P.D.

"Is that the man you met in the hospital last spring?" Lyon asked.

The boy started bouncing in his seat; there was hope for him yet. "That's him! That's my father!" He gave it to his aunt, who looked

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up from it and nodded. "It looks like a mug shot," she said.

"It is. The man's name is Randolph Otto. Currently he's in the New York State Penitentiary in Ossining, serving a sentence of ten to fifteen years for burglary. It's his second offense."

"His name's William Thew." Jasper was sullen again.

"The name doesn't appear among his recorded aliases. I hardly expected it to." Lyon scowled at the plant on his desk and pinched a leaf, squashing a bug. He wiped his hand and returned the hanky to his pocket. "When you met, it was May, a particularly pleasant month this year. I suspected the man was there for no legitimate purpose when you told me he was wearing a heavy overcoat. In warm weather, bulky coats are useful for one thing only: concealing stolen items. Armed with that supposition, I turned to the police to determine whether they had investigated a complaint of plundering at Brooklyn General during that time. The news that a suspect had been arrested and convicted was a bonus. I congratulate your brother officers, Mr. Stoddard."

The captain said something inappropriate with a lady and child in the room, or for that matter my Uncle Butt. I'd have made an example of him if my throat weren't still sore.

"The late Ms. Hull—Jasper's mother—had nothing of value in her room," Lyon continued; "otherwise, I'm sure Jasper would have noted that something was missing and included that fact when he reported the events of that day to me. Mr. Otto left her room empty-handed."

Jillian said, "I'd brought home her personal effects the day before. She wasn't expected to recover, and I've heard stories about watches and purses disappearing from hospital rooms." She didn't elaborate. Apparently she hated to interrupt his story, however briefly.

"A footpad, surprised in the midst of his pillaging, will say anything to deflect suspicion long enough for him to make his escape. Unfortunately, Ms. Hull assisted him unwarily by asking if he was there to visit her sister. He seized upon that, and when she asked his name, he gave her the first thing that suggested itself."

Jasper hadn't given up yet. "That don't make sense! He could've said Tom Smith or John Jones. How do you come up with William Thew out of nowhere?"

"You don't. When you said he'd looked out the window before identifying himself, I decided to send Mr. Woodbine to Brooklyn General to photograph the view through the window."

I was still standing. He opened his top drawer and handed me two of the pictures I'd taken. I gave one to Jasper. It was one of the shots of the advertisement painted on the wall of the brick hardware building. The legend read:

SHERWIN-WILLIAMS PAINT
"It Covers the World!"

A picture accompanied it, showing a can of paint spilling its con-

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tents onto the globe.

"I don't get it." The boy passed the photo to his aunt, who looked at it, then at Lyon with her eyebrows lifted.

Lyon said, "The conditions were somewhat different from when Randolph Otto looked out on the same scene. It was spring, as I said, and tree leaves obscured parts of the sign. I've created an amateur artist's rendition of the scene as it would have appeared to him. Arnie?" The fat little exhibitionist was excited, I could tell; he only forgot to address me formally in company when he could barely contain himself.

I handed Jasper the picture Lyon had doctored with his Sharpie, blacking out the portions that would have been covered by leaves:

WILLIAM
the W

The boy looked up, his pinched little face pale. "He said he was an artist!"

"Inspiration from the same source. An artist uses paint. He wasn't your father. At the time you were born, he'd been in prison in New Jersey for more than a year. That was his first offense."

Stoddard snatched the photo from Jillian, flung it to the floor, hurled himself at Lyon's desk, and brought him up to date on his opinion of word puzzles and Lyon. He laid a blazing trail to the exit, leaving Lyon white and shaken. Jasper wasn't any more pleased, but his aunt restrained him from kicking a chair and thanked Lyon for putting an end to the business. She was a pretty good sport. I wondered how she felt about semi-reformed felons.

He handed her an envelope from his drawer. It bore his letterhead and a name addressed in his childlike hand.

"It isn't sealed," she said.

"I wouldn't presume. As the boy's guardian you'd naturally want to know what it contained before you delivered it."

She left, resting a hand on one of Jasper's hunched shoulders. Lyon and I spent the rest of the evening quietly, he reading the Hardy Boys in an E. Phillips Oppenheim dust jacket, I making marks in *The Habitual Handicapper.* I didn't tell him I'd caught a glimpse of the name he'd scribbled on the envelope, and when I found out later it belonged to the director of an art scholarship program at Brooklyn College, I didn't tell him that. The program had been endowed by an anonymous benefactor. Nothing about it sounds the least bit typical of his role model. I figure I'll needle him with it when I frame and hang Jasper's caricature of him.

Which I may not for a while. Today at lunch, Claudius Lyon leaned on his elbow and held up a tired-looking lox drooping on the end of his fork.

"Arnie," he said, "how long have you been working for me?" ●

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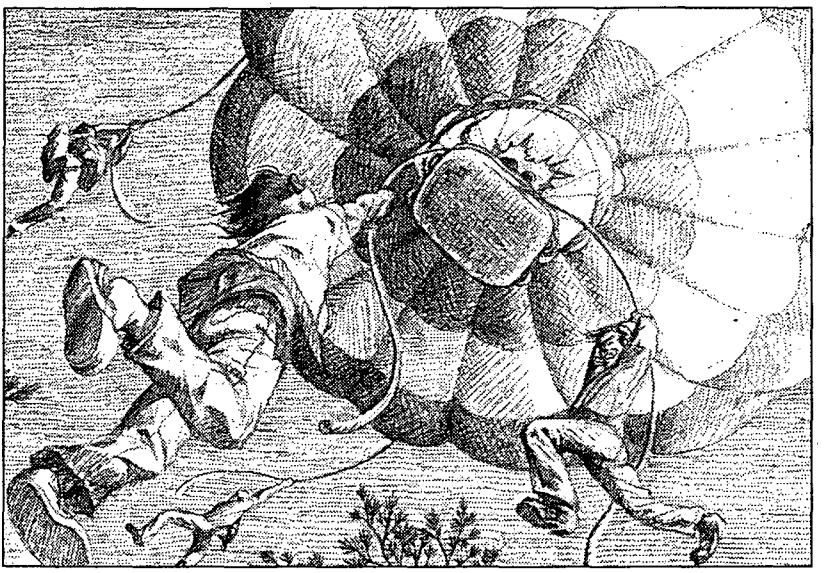

Art by Jason Eckhardt

Between the Dark and the Daylight

by Tom Piccirilli

His face was so anguished it was writhing. That was Frank Bradley the first time I saw him, about sixty feet off the ground.

His feet twined above me while we both dangled from the safety-line ropes. His forlorn moans echoed across the front-range hills, and he'd bitten through his bottom lip. Blood misted on the wind and flew down against my forehead.

The balloon smacked broadside into a pine tree and shook the other two guys on the ropes loose. Neither of them screamed on their way down. One landed on his back, and the impact drove him three feet underground. The other smacked a boulder that shattered his pelvis, severed his spinal column, and saved his life. He pinwheeled off the rock and came to rest on his face along the dog walk, in front of an elderly woman clutching a Pomeranian.

I held on, just like Frank Bradley, who shrieked at me, "Don't let

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go! My son, my boy! Johnny!"

I wasn't letting go. You can make decisions in an instant that will forge the direction of the rest of your life. You can perform acts that will curse you with a hellish mark forever. You can sell your conscience by making a single mistake. You can do your best and still not make things right.

Spinning in the wind, I couldn't see the kid in the basket, but I could hear him crying. He sounded terrified and very young. Maybe only six or seven. Too damn young to work the controls and hit whichever valve had to be pressed to lower the thing. I thought, *What kind of father takes a child that young up in a hot-air balloon? And how the hell did the idiot get outside of it on the ropes with the kid still in the basket?*

A four-time winner of the Bram Stoker Award, Tom Piccirilli makes his *EQMM* debut here with a tale involving one of the most unusual scenarios for murder we've ever come across. He's also the author of 17 novels. Of one of them, *Headstones*, the *New York Times* said: "beautiful and funny . . . a hardboiled hallucination . . . it gives you the distinctive shiver all good writing provides: the certainty that the writer's own ghosts are in it."

A lot goes through your mind when you're six stories in the air and rising.

Despite his misery, I wanted to beat the hell out of Bradley—whose name I didn't know then—all across the park meadow speeding by below us. Except I was still holding the line, and we were running out of acreage fast.

The balloon caromed into another stand of pine, and thick branches brutally scraped across Bradley's back, breaking his grip. His fists opened and he flailed, slipping fifteen feet until he was side by side with me, holding the other rope. He screamed, "Don't let go!"

I'd hold on as long as I could, but eventually I would have to let go. We'd both have to, and the idea scared the hell out of me. I had the rope in a death grip and didn't want to wind up like the guy who'd be found planted half as deep as his casket would be. They were going to have to dig him up just to bury him again.

"There's no way to do it!" I shouted.

"Don't let go!"

"Listen—"

"Don't let go!"

I wanted to shout, *Stop saying that!*

The balloon bounded from pine to pine, nothing slowing it. You'd think maybe the branches would've pierced the silk, but somehow—miraculously, really, if you could call it that—they didn't. We had about another couple thousand feet of parkland forest to go and then there'd be nothing but empty fields until the first break of front-range stone ridges. After that, there were the canyon cliffs

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and brutal mountain winds working up for another fifteen miles until we'd be high in the Rockies.

I kept thinking, I never should've moved out West.

I kept thinking my crappy apartment in the East Village really hadn't been so bad.

We couldn't bring the balloon down by ourselves. It bounced into another huge tree and the awful, overwhelming crashing sound was harrowing around us. The balloon shook insanely and the ropes twisted. I cracked sideways into the trunk and pine needles tore at my face. My feet touched branches. Then I was standing on air, and then there were branches again. I had to drop: It was something you couldn't think about, you just had to do it.

Another vicious collision nearly ripped my arms from the sockets and Bradley and I both let go at the same moment. We clung to thick tree limbs seventy-five feet off the ground. He let out a screech. I think I did, too. He glared at me with his agonized eyes and edged his way across the branch looking toward the balloon, which had almost cleared the trees and started to rise again.

The basket slipped free of the last limb with an enormous scraping noise, but the silk still hadn't been pierced. Bradley worked like a maniac to get up to the basket, hand over hand as wads of bark came off and rained down to the ground. His palms were shredded. There was no way for him to get to it.

The boy inside cried out and a sob broke in my own throat. He whimpered, *"Daddy, please, Daddy—"* He was petrified but still thought his father could save him.

But he never raised his head over the top of the basket. I wanted to see his face, if only for an instant. It was extremely important to me, and I didn't know why.

Bradley screamed, "Johnny!"

He and I watched the balloon soar away until we couldn't hear his son anymore. It lifted higher and higher, caught on the canyon winds, occasionally bouncing against the cliff walls until it was over them and almost out of sight.

We were both breathless from our exertions, but he had enough left in him to turn back and glare at me some more. He said, "You let go!"

"So did you. We had no choice."

"You could've held on!"

"We couldn't have."

Talking to the guy this high in the air, covered in pine bristles and sap, his blood drying on my face—just hanging there and waiting for the next moment to happen as his son floated away.

It took me twenty minutes to climb down out of the tree.

Bradley stayed up there wailing and cursing me as I cautiously clutched at branches and lowered myself. By the time I hit the ground there were two ambulances, a fire truck, and eight cruisers parked

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at the edge of the woods, cops and park rangers prowling everywhere.

The shock of what had happened hit me all at once, before I'd taken two steps toward anybody. A heaviness thickened in my chest and my hands started to tremble badly. My legs weakened and I could feel the blood draining out of my head. A wash of blackness passed across my eyes and I might've toppled over if a cop with the name badge Kowalski hadn't grabbed me.

He had gray eyes and some real muscle and power to him. He held me up with one hand and said, "Sit down."

"I'll be okay."

"Yeah, but sit down."

But I didn't want to sit anywhere among the pines. I scanned the sky and didn't see the balloon anywhere.

"The kid?" I asked.

"What kid?"

"The one in the balloon."

"Somebody was in there?"

"The hell do you think we were all trying so hard to hold on to it for? Is anyone following it?"

"It's gone over the tree line and ridge of the canyon."

"You've got to get some rangers up there."

He thumbed his radio but there was already lots of buzzing going on, people squawking and more sirens erupting in the distance. They were coming in from Fort Collins and Greeley and other nearby towns, everybody driving to the wrong place. I saw a helicopter go overhead.

Kowalski said, "Tell me what happened."

"There's not much."

"Tell me anyway."

We recognized each other as former New Yorkers transplanted to Colorado for reasons we still weren't sure about. We both had the same general air of confusion and homesickness about us, mired in a false toughness and a general who-gives-a-damn attitude to hide our fears. It took one to recognize one. It was pretty obvious that somewhere along the way he'd made a misstep and it had fouled up his life so badly that he had to move two thousand miles away to get clear of it. Some kind of scandal—he'd taken money from the wrong guy or hadn't given a cut of it to the right one. Whatever the mistake, it was costing him now and it would for the rest of his life. I was a different story.

A ring of cops stepped in close but no one said anything.

I explained how I'd been in the park staring off at Long's Peak trying to find inspiration for the next story or song, the way I usually did when my thoughts ran dry.

I'd been sitting around the park a hell of a lot lately and not much had been shaking loose inside my head. I'd written one line—*Between the Dark and the Daylight*—knowing I was lifting it from somewhere but not caring so long as something else followed. Nothing did.

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So I tried to sweat the next sentence out, staring into the white of the page. Sitting there like that for a while, waiting for something to guide my hand.

Instead, a tremendous shadow crossed over my notebook and a man howled and two guys ran past directly in front of me.

I looked up and there was the balloon, with Bradley dangling off one of the safety lines and shouting for help, the other two guys doing their best to catch up, reaching for the trailing ropes as the balloon swung low but still didn't hit the ground.

You're sitting there waiting for your next sentence and instead you get this.

I hadn't seen a hot-air balloon since I was kid on Long Island and couldn't figure out how anybody could lose one.

I got to my feet and started stumbling in that direction, the sheer forceful oddity of the situation sort of pulling me after it. The guy who'd eventually be paralyzed from the neck down looked back to me while he ran and shouted, "There's a boy in there! We have to get it back down!"

I hesitated another second. It's normal, it would happen to anybody. We don't trust unfamiliar conditions and unknown people, it's easier to sit back down and fight the empty page. But the kid let out a murmuring whine that caught on the wind and somehow that got me moving.

I sprinted maybe fifty yards across the park before I finally caught up to the lines. By then, Bradley had actually managed to climb up a few more feet, almost to within reaching distance of the basket, and the other guys had grabbed hold of the ropes. I did a weird flying dive that should have made me land on my head, but somehow it worked. I was on a safety line draping from the basket, flitting there, sort of flying along with three other men, and we were rising.

There should've been about ten emergency shut-offs and built-in features to prevent this sort of thing from happening. Without anybody working the burner, the balloon should've been lowering, even in the wind. I looked up, but couldn't see anything but the bottom of the basket. Then the rope I was on flailed outwards a few feet and I spun around.

There were health nuts in the world that did this sort of thing for fun, I was sure. I craned my neck and saw that the burner was still lit, a lick of orange and blue flame igniting. Something had gone seriously wrong, and I'd jumped right into it. The balloon wasn't going to come down on its own.

It was already too late to jump. We were over the small lake in the center of the park. Pretty but man-made, only about four feet deep. If any of us cut loose now, even over the water, we'd hit with enough force to drive our kneecaps up through our chests. My father used to tell me about parachuting soldiers who'd leaped out over the Nam jungles and landed wrong. Twenty years later and

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the images were still sharp and bright in my mind. On top of everything else, I wanted to clock my father.

The kid was crying and Bradley was moaning, unable to climb any higher. He didn't sound smart or sane or even human. He should've been yelling to his kid to hit the kill switch. I opened my mouth to shout and could barely hear myself. The rushing wind drove my voice back into my throat.

If you're lucky, you get to puzzle out your what-the-hell-am-I-doing moments later on in the game. You look back and you can't believe it occurred, and you've got no idea how it was you wound up there, doing that thing.

Now I'd made it down again intact. The other two guys who'd lent a hand hadn't.

"What the hell happened?" I asked. "Who is this guy? Where'd this balloon come from?"

There was a second when Kowalski almost gave me the "I'll ask the questions, sir" speech, but he could see it wasn't going to work on me the way it did on the rich retirees waiting out the end of their lives up in Estes Park.

A lot of yelling was coming from Bradley's tree. It took three firemen on cherry pickers working up into the pine to finally grab hold of him and pull him down. He screamed as they lowered him and went wild when he hit the ground. He started seething and throwing punches and hissing worse than an animal, calling for Johnny like the kid might be just a few feet behind him, just out of eyeshot.

He spun on his heels and began to laugh in a way I'd never heard anybody laugh before, not even the schizos and addicts in the East Village alleys. It was so chilling it brushed me back a step. Kowalski felt it, too, and he puffed his chest out and held his chin up as a way to defend himself against it.

Three officers joined the firemen and they all wrestled Bradley onto his belly and got the cuffs on him.

I said, "Hey, come on . . . !" but Kowalski just scowled at me and started listening to and talking into his radio again. It looked like Bradley had slugged and elbowed a few of the cops. Blood speckled their faces. They'd follow procedure when it came down to somebody attacking their brother officers. It didn't matter where you went, cops would always be the same about that.

They carried him to a cruiser and tossed him into the back. As it pulled across the field, Bradley turned in the backseat to stare at me. He wasn't laughing anymore, but that goddamn chill stayed with me.

"Tell me what you people know so far," I said.

Kowalski tightened his lips and then shrugged. "Information is still coming in. Looks like this one, his name's Frank Bradley. Used to run some book in Nevada before he took a fall for bank robbery."

"What?"

"Yeah, his wife split with the son. He figures it's because he's not

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making enough cash. So he walks in, grabs a manager by the throat, forces the guy to clear a couple of the tills. Sets off about five silent alarms. He gets something like three grand, walks outside, the dye pack explodes, and he's standing there in the parking lot turning purple when the local PD arrives. He's not what you call one of your better planners."

I shook my head. "That's more than just stupidity. This guy's crazy."

"Yeah, well, maybe. He did two years in the state pen. Gets out and goes looking for his wife. Finds out she's split the state and come to Colorado. Tracks her to Berthoud. Grabs the kid and wheels off with him. Tells the boy he's going to get him ice cream and toys and balloons. They drive by the spring carnival down there, off 17 and 287. They've got a hot-air balloon set up."

"My God. So he hijacks it?"

"Figured he'd be funny, I guess. Probably tells his boy, 'Look at the balloon I got you.' Anyway, the thing is roped to the ground, it's just supposed to go up twenty feet or so, then back down. But Bradley takes the kid up and unties the safety lines, forces the carnival guy to fire it all the way up. They start hovering and catch a stiff breeze. The carnival guy jumps out the other side of the basket, falls ten feet, and sprains his ankle. Bradley tries to screw around with the controls and the next thing you know—"

"The maniac is drifting over Loveland Park, holding on to one of the ropes himself."

"Yeah."

"Any chance the kid might be okay?"

"Maybe, if we can find him in time."

It wasn't going to happen.

He knew it and I knew it. I looked at the expanse of the Rockies, thinking about how far the balloon had already traveled, up from Berthoud. If the wind hadn't been from the east, and the balloon had instead carried out toward Greeley, they could've tracked him no matter how long it took. There was nothing for thirty miles in that direction except farmland.

But heading west from the foothills, with the balloon drifting higher from the jammed burner, it would float across the range and just keep going until it hit a cliff and dumped the kid across a couple thousand feet of mountain.

Kowalski stared off in the direction the cruiser had gone with Bradley. I looked that way too, the chill working against me, tightening the skin on the back of my neck. That laugh. Jesus.

I made a full statement at the police department and signed the paperwork. They escorted me to my apartment and didn't look back after they'd dropped me off. While I sat on my couch drinking a tumbler of whiskey—feeling the walls closing in on me, my hands twitching as if I were still holding on to the line, thinking I'd maybe

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never sleep again—I slept and dreamed of the boy.

He was dying, but not quite there yet. He stood in front of me, one small hand pressed against my chest. But his head was turned completely around. He spoke, and his words faded out behind him. I heard "Daddy," and "Help," and even my own name. It was one of those dreams where you couldn't run or speak or do any damn thing at all. I knew I was asleep but couldn't break out of it. I could feel myself gripping the cushions someplace far away, and heard a voice that wasn't entirely my own, mewling there. I grabbed the kid by the shoulder and tried to spin him around, but his head kept turning away from me.

The media went nuts. It was a big story for Colorado. Bizarre and full of human interest. You looked at it one way and you saw a bunch of strangers trying to help out a kid, one of them losing his life, another paralyzed from the shoulders down. His name was Bill Mandor and he was on every channel. Half his face was bandaged and around the edges it looked like he'd been scraped to the bone when he hit the dog walk. The one good thing about his being paralyzed was that he couldn't feel his shattered legs and spine and didn't need painkillers. He looked clear-headed and spoke like the kind of heroes I remembered from when I was a kid. Men who could staunchly handle the worst events and injuries through willpower and nobility. He made me shake my head.

Reporters camped out on the lawn in front of my apartment manager's door. I took the phone off the hook and didn't answer the door for three days. Eventually the camera crews got bored and left. I watched cable news programs every waking moment hoping there'd be information about the boy, but despite hundreds of volunteers hiking all over the front range, the canyons, and the east side of the divide, nobody had seen the balloon. It seemed impossible.

At night, helicopters buzzed through the skies, heading up to the national park and the thousands of square miles of mountain terrain and forest land.

Kowalski called me five days later, on an afternoon full of sirens, and said, "Bradley's loose."

"What's that mean?"

"What do you think it means?"

"A former bank robber out of the joint only a couple of days hijacks a balloon that causes the death of a good samaritan, and you spring him?"

"Blame your judicial system, not me. He was obviously out of his head, so they put him under guard at the hospital, in the mental wing. They said it was depression brought on by grief. You can't help but feel sorry for the guy, his kid gone and all. He got flowers and prayer cards by the truckload. He slept for ninety-six hours straight, cuffed to the bed. What they call nonresponsive. Not a coma, just a

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deep sleep. They thought he might be dying. Losing his will to live."

"Cripes."

"Like he was forcing himself to kick the bucket. He started going into respiratory failure, so they got a crash cart in there, defibrillator, oxygen mask, the whole works. Five minutes after they got him breathing normally again, he woke up, kicked the hell out of a nurse, and stole a car from the parking lot."

I think I hissed. "This is terrific."

"Anyway, Bradley knocked over another bank an hour after he got free, still wearing his hospital gown. Nobody knows where he got the gun. This time he smartened up some. Got almost thirty grand, no dye pack, though he set off an alarm. But he was out of there in a hurry, and now he's on the run."

I thought about the kind of man who would stop off somewhere for a gun but not put on a pair of pants before committing grand larceny.

"He's going to come after me," I said. "He thinks I killed his kid because I let go of the rope."

Even if I hadn't been a paranoid writer with an exaggerated sense of self-importance, I would've thought that. It had been that laugh of Bradley's. It wasn't only insane. It had that see-you-later quality to it.

Kowalski grunted. "He's a nut. If he goes anywhere, it'll be back to his ex-wife's place."

"No, he only went there for his son. Any word on the kid?"

"No, no sign of the balloon. Maybe it held to the front range and came down in somebody's field. I don't know. We probably won't know for a while yet."

"Listen—"

But he was done. Kowalski was the type of cop who got bored easily and always had to be in charge of a conversation. "I picked up one of your books," he said. "I read about half of it. I didn't like it. So I gave it to my wife."

"Listen—"

"She reads everything. She didn't like it either."

"Listen to me. Bradley will show up here next."

"It's a possibility."

"More than that, he just walked in my door. He's got a gun on me. Gotta go."

I hung up and Bradley smiled at me from my apartment doorway. I figured the apartment manager had gotten tired of dealing with reporters trying to get into the building and had disconnected the buzzer wiring. I was going to die because I hadn't double-checked it. I'd gotten slack in Colorado. I wasn't paranoid enough anymore, just bored, like Kowalski, and waiting for the end.

Bradley started in with that hideous laughter until every muscle in my body had tightened to the point of trembling. At least he'd put on pants, I was glad to see. How awful it would've been to get snuffed by a guy in a hospital gown. The noise got louder and I

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started breathing so fast that I got light-headed. For a second I saw the kid with his backwards head standing behind his father, still saying "Daddy," his white hand pointing at me.

I'd had my run-ins with maniacs before. Most people in the world have, but definitely everybody in New York. They were common maniacs, but still pretty "out there." With me, it had mostly been ex-girlfriends who started off talking about taking care of me for the rest of my life and ended up setting fire to my cars. I'd had an obsessive stalker who claimed one of my horror stories had opened a portal to hell and released his father. He'd shown up at my apartment in Manhattan with a switchblade and tried to stab me with it overhand instead of slipping it between my ribs. I had a half-inch-deep scarred gouge from where the knife had deflected off my sternum. It was one of the reasons why I'd left home.

Frank Bradley held a snub-nosed .38 on me. It wasn't a Colorado gun. The guys out here carried Colt .45s and rifles, but nothing as slick as a snub .38. You didn't show off to your cowboy barroom cronies or go hunting elk with a .38. There was only one purpose to it. You put it up to somebody's forehead and you took him out of the game fast.

We stood there like that for two minutes. It was a long two minutes. It gave me time to think about my regrets. There were a lot of them. Bradley's laughter eventually died out, but he kept sneering at me. It was an expression I'd seen many times in my life, and it infuriated me as much now as it always had before.

Up close now I saw the kind of man he was—had been, would always be. Every smashed hope etched into his features. The lost chances, the missed turnoffs. The failed efforts, the stupid moves, and the mistakes that shouldn't have cost him as much as they had. All of them his own fault, by his own hand. All of them covered by a hundred excuses and scapegoats. You didn't have to look hard to see it all there.

"Bradley, think about—"

"Don't talk. I don't want to hear you talk."

So we stood there for another few minutes. It gave us both more time to think about the past, to wonder if there'd be a future.

You can get used to anything if you endure it long enough. Even with the gun trained on me, I started to relax. The longer someone doesn't pull a trigger, the more you believe it won't happen. Anything was better than listening to that laugh.

"Let's go," he said, gesturing with the barrel.

I moved down the hall and out into the parking lot with all the false dignity of an aristocrat heading for the guillotine. He pointed to a Mustang with the engine running. "You drive."

"Where?"

"Don't talk, I'll tell you."

I drove as he directed me. We roamed the area for a while in a

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strange pattern that I eventually recognized as the path the balloon probably took from Berthoud up 287 to the park. I saw the empty grounds where the carnival had set up. We slipped back into town and around the park and the lake before he aimed us toward the mountains.

I drove the canyon roads heading higher and higher into the Rockies, wondering if I should try something stupid like crashing into the narrow cliff walls. My mind was stuffed with dumb thoughts and I kept trying to cycle through them until something intelligent hit me. Nothing did.

"Why are you here?" he asked.

"Because you've got a gun on me."

"Here, in this town."

"I've been trying very hard to figure that out."

He swiped the pistol barrel across my head. I was lucky it was only a snub-nose. Despite his silence and his outward relative calm, he was wired and explosive. He really didn't know how to handle a gun. He barely tapped me, but I didn't take it lightly. The fact that he didn't know what he was doing meant he might crack my skull open next time, or the .38 might accidentally go off.

"Do you know what you did?" he asked.

"Got involved," I said.

"You killed my boy."

"I tried to help. I held on to a rope sixty feet in the air for as long as I could."

"Not long enough! You couldn't hold it long enough!"

"Neither could you."

He shoved the barrel into my ribs this time, growling and groaning, speaking words that weren't words except maybe in his nightmares. For four days he'd forced himself to sleep, on his way toward death, but had woken up just so he could make this play for me, the scapegoat for his own stabbing conscience.

I noticed an odd sound, a tiny ringing in the car. I glanced over and saw that he was spinning a key on a chain. He noticed me looking and held it up, but said nothing. It was a bus-station locker key. I'd seen plenty of them when I was roaming the country, trying to settle down somewhere to find my art again. Sometimes you start to drift and you just keep going, for no reason you can name. You ride and ride and hope the right thing appears around the next corner, even though you have no idea what it might be. He shoved the key back in his pocket.

We kept climbing higher until we were in the switchbacks. The temperature had dropped twenty degrees over the last several miles. Another thousand feet and we'd be able to see our breath. We'd left the towns and the cabins behind and kept threading through the mountains. The car started puttering, the thin air fouling the engine. You were supposed to do something to the timing or

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the spark plugs or the air filter, who the hell knew. Bradley was getting more and more excited, as if he knew we were heading to a special, secret place where he'd put his past to rest.

Snow started to appear on the ground, on the rock. The air thinned but held in the cold, the atmosphere lush and vibrant around us. I'd never been up this far. The wind tore at the car, rocking us on our shocks. The trails thinned. Finally, we ran out of road.

"Now what?" I asked.

"Get out. Climb."

We got out and he prodded me forward across the rugged, stony landscape. I'd been in Colorado five years and had never hiked through the national park, or anywhere else for that matter. Now he had me clambering up rocks like those adrenaline junkies who scaled sheer bluff faces. I was out of shape and I wouldn't last long. Not that Bradley would need me to. I knew he was leading me to an edge someplace. His edge, my edge. Maybe he'd been here himself before, ready to throw himself off the rim. Maybe he was walking as blindly as me, just waiting for the next thing to come along.

We came to a slope that dropped off into nothingness. We were so high up that there was an electrical buzzing in my fingers and toes and chest, an assaulting awareness that one foot further would be a step into oblivion.

The wind slithered around us. Bradley jabbed the gun into my back again. "Move."

"No."

"Then I'll kill you."

"You know, Bradley . . . you give a man two choices at death and he's going to choose the one that makes you work a little harder for it."

"It's just pulling a trigger."

"It's better to make you do it than do it myself." I didn't know why that was the case, but I knew it was true. I still wasn't all that worried—maybe it was altitude sickness, or maybe I'd had a death wish for a while and only now was starting to realize it.

"Move! To the edge!"

"I'm not going down there."

"Yes, you are. We both are."

"Why are you doing this?"

He rushed me and jabbed the barrel under my chin. It hurt like hell. "I want you to know what it was like for my son."

I growled, "You're the one who put him in it. You're the one who took him up."

"Shut up!"

"You're the one who let go, same as me. We had no choice."

"Shut up, damn you!"

He jabbed the barrel harder into my throat until I gagged.

"Now, jump! Do it or I'll put one in your brain."

"How is that supposed to scare me at this point?"

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"You might survive if you jump."

"At twelve thousand feet? Yeah, right."

Twelve thousand feet. One hundred and twenty stories. We were higher than the Empire State Building.

Not only had he gone insane with his rage and grief, but he really hadn't thought about the end game at all. There wasn't enough thrill in it for him. He was starting to understand that my death wouldn't take away an ounce of his agony. It was descending on him very quickly now and an unbearable horror came with it. He'd be alone soon with nothing but his guilt. The fear in him was much greater than my own. I saw the realization grow in his eyes along with his terror.

My feet were slipping out from beneath me on the icy rock. I was gearing up for some kind of a stupid move. Everybody thinks it's easy, you just attack, you just spin and kick, punch and whirl and karate chop. These people, the kind who never say boo to the boss, let their relatives roll over them, and take every gram of garbage force-fed to them through their entire lives. These people, they think it's easy to make your move on death.

Then I saw it, no more than fifty feet from us, down in the rocks, nearly at the rim. I'd been expecting it the whole ride up, because when facing your fear you also face your fate, and in that moment, any damn thing can happen.

I pointed over his shoulder and said, "There's the balloon."

It had drifted twenty miles and more than six thousand feet thanks to the front-range winds. It was impossible, I thought. It had to be. There was no way the balloon could have gotten up this high. Even with the updraft carrying the kid along, it never should have made it this far. Even if the kid had accidentally gotten the burner opened up all the way, it shouldn't have been enough to get the balloon this high.

It should have bounced into one of the cliffs miles ago. The silk would have torn and the whole thing would have plummeted down in the middle of the mountains. But somehow the flight of the balloon had missed every jagged rock. Hiding behind the ridges and within the thinning tree line of the national park so nobody could see it, dancing so close to the craggy banks that he just kept rising. With hundreds of volunteers searching for him and nobody seeing.

The balloon had wedged into a tight stony niche. The basket had folded in half and the deflated silk had collapsed on top of it. When you saw a hot-air balloon you saw a beautiful mammoth thing. This you could've fit in your closet.

Bradley let out a cry that was part despair and part elation. He dropped the gun and forgot about me. I had to keep reminding myself that he was crazy.

He ran up to the niche and started yanking at the silk, trying to pull the basket free. He screamed his son's name, and the echoes

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swarmed across the cliffs like a thousand distressed men calling out the names of their thousand dead sons.

I picked up the pistol and tossed it over the edge.

Bradley yelled, "Help me!" I stared at him for a moment and then climbed over there.

It wasn't for him. I wanted to see the boy's face. It still felt very important that I actually see what the kid looked like.

Bradley gripped one end of the basket and I took hold of the other and we pulled until we got it open wide enough that he could climb in. He ducked low for a second and I lurched aside until I could peer into the cramped space.

The dry, cold mountain climate had preserved the boy these last several days. At this elevation, no animals or insects had been at him in the crags. Even though the basket had struck the mountain hard enough to crumple in on itself, his skin hadn't been touched. He wore a T-shirt and shorts and sneakers with holes in the big toes. The basket had folded around him like a cocoon, without actually coming in contact with his flesh. It was another miracle, depending on whether you saw it that way.

He was still facing away from me.

From what I could see, except for his coloring, he looked like a perfectly healthy, sleeping child.

Bradley screamed, "Johnny!" He took the boy in his arms and fell against the side of the basket.

It started to slide. I had a chance to dive, maybe grab ahold of it, but I didn't see much point anymore. It skidded across the rock ledge and the deflated silk washed across the rocks and rippled like river water.

The basket began to tip but bumped an outcropping and righted itself. The silk flapped out as if trying to inflate, but failed.

For a moment, Bradley hung there in space with his arms around his dead little boy.

He stuck his hand out to me. I reached and he clutched my right forearm. I had maybe five seconds to haul him out of the basket before it flopped over the rim.

I stared into his eyes and thought, *He's just as insane now as he was a half-hour ago. Maybe more so. He still blames me. He'll never see it any differently, especially after the kid falls into the chasm and his body is lost forever.*

You can make decisions in an instant that will forge the direction of the rest of your life. You can perform acts that will curse you with a hellish mark forever. You can sell your conscience by making a single mistake. You can do your best and still not make things right.

I kept thinking, *Here it is.*

I kept thinking, *One last chance.*

I wondered if Bradley could see the same things in my face that I saw in his—the foolishness, the screwed-up attempts, the ridiculous efforts and disappointments.

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I never should've let the stalker scare me out of New York. I shouldn't have lost my dream. I could've made it through the fire if only I'd held strong.

I snaked my free hand into his pocket and snagged the locker key.

It's where the money would be. Thirty grand would help me get home again. A little start-up fund to make something right happen for once. A demo reel, time to write another book. One that would sell well enough that I could feel vindicated for all the hours I wasted glaring into the abysmal white of the endless empty page.

I leaned in closer and said, "You're an idiot for putting your kid in a stolen hot-air balloon, you bastard."

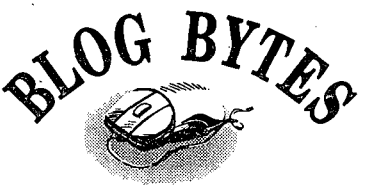
I had to snap my forearm hard aside twice before I broke his grip.

The basket dipped another foot over the edge, the silk whispering like a child. Bradley could've done something—made a wild dive the way I had the afternoon I caught the rope—but I could see he just didn't have the resolve for it. He really had lost the will to live. Imagine.

He stood there with his lost son in his arms, no expression on his face, as he tipped out of sight.

The key chimed faintly in my hand, like the final small toll of every man's wasted life. I still hadn't seen the boy's face, but it would be with me forever, on every page of my life and work from here on out.

I figured I could handle it. ❂



by Bill Crider

It's vacation time, time to take a trip across the Atlantic and see what's going on with blogs and crime-related Web sites in other lands and climes.

There are so many fine Irish crime writers these days that it sometimes seems they're taking over the field. Declan Burke, author of *The Big O,* is one of them, and he has a blog called *Crime Always Pays* **(http://crimealwayspays.blogspot.com)** that will keep you up to date on all the new books by Irish writers, and some others as well. His Monday Review is essential reading, and occasionally Burke even gives away books. You can't beat a deal like that.

While you're visiting blogs that deal with matters across the pond, don't forget to look in on *International Noir Fiction* **(http://internationalnoir.blogspot.com)**, where you'll find "reviews and ideas on crime novels (mostly from outside the U.S.)." (continued on page 157)

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SPLIT/BRAIN

by Joyce Carol Oates

Joyce Carol Oates's latest novel, *My Sister, My Love: The Intimate Story of Skyler Rampike,* was released in June 2008 (Ecco Press); and of particular interest to readers of this magazine, the Ontario Review Press recently reprinted in trade paperback her 1984 *Mysteries of Winterthurn,* in which detective hero Xavier Kilgarvan is confronted with three baffling cases. ¶

In that instant of entering the house by the rear door when she sees, or thinks she sees, a fleeting movement like a shadow in the hallway beyond the kitchen and she hears a sharp intake of breath or panting, it is her decision not to retreat in panicked haste from her house but to step forward sharply calling *Jeremy? Is that you?* For she'd seen her sister-in-law's car parked on the shoulder of the road some fifty feet before the driveway to her house, she is certain it must be Veronica's Toyota which Jeremy often drives, it occurs to her now that she'd expected to see Veronica at the clinic that morning but Veronica hadn't turned up, like buzzing hornets these thoughts rush at her even as she calls out more sharply *Is that you? Jeremy?* For the boy shouldn't be here in this house, at this time, uninvited, she'd left the rear door unlocked as frequently she did driving into town to the clinic, returning and later in the day driving back into town to the clinic, a distance of precisely 2.6 miles, of which she has memorized each intervening property, driveway, intersecting road and street, to be played, replayed, and run backward in her mind as she drives into town, to the rehab clinic, to see her husband, and returns to the house in preparation for driving back to the clinic, which is, she has come to realize, but the preparation for returning home. For much of this morning she has been at the clinic, tries to arrive precisely at eight A.M. when the clinic opens its front doors to visitors, for she is an early riser, both she and Jim are early risers, rarely sleep past dawn on even bitter-cold sunless winter mornings. And at the clinic, at her husband's bedside, usually she will remain until seven P.M. when, exhausted, she returns home for the remainder of the day. At Jim's bedside she reads to him, checks e-mail on her laptop and

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reads to Jim those messages, ever decreasing in frequency, that seem to her important for Jim to hear; with childlike logic she is thinking *If I am a good wife, if I am good, God will spare us, God will make him well again,* and so far her prayer which she understands is both craven and futile has not been entirely scorned, for Jim has been transferred from the hospital to the clinic and there is the promise that one day soon he will be sent back home to recuperate and to recover his lost strength. Already he no longer needs to be fed through a tube, already the color is returning to his face that had been deathly pale. Though still he tires easily, nods off in the midst of speaking, friends who come to visit have learned to disguise their shock and discomfort at seeing Jim Gould so changed, poor Jim who'd once been so vital, so energetic, smiling and good-natured and much-loved and now his body seems to have shrunken, he has lost more than fifty pounds, his hands are weak, legs useless, the once-powerful muscles atrophied and now his legs are reduced to bones beneath thin hairless skin, terrible to see. And so she has learned not to see. And so she has learned to disguise her fear. And so she has learned to smile as nurses learn to smile. And when he has asked her please massage his legs, his legs hurt, she smiles and kneads the bone-hard legs, thin now as the legs of a young child, massaging these legs she jokes with her husband, she loves him so, she would die for this man, she believes, and yet: how fatigued she has grown in the past several weeks, how exasperated with her husband's demands, Jim has become unpredictable in his moods, quick to become angry, this morning hurrying to get to the clinic she'd forgotten to bring with her the latest issue of a professional journal for which her husband has been an advisory editor, seeing she'd forgotten it Jim was visibly disappointed and sulky and she'd said, Darling, I'll drive back to get the journal, it's no trouble, and immediately he said no, it isn't necessary, you can bring it next time, and she insisted yes, of course she would drive back to get it for him, she has other errands in town that need to be done this morning. And anyway, Jim was scheduled for tests this morning. And she kisses his cheek, tells him she will return within the hour, in secret she's childishly relieved to be able to leave the clinic so soon after arriving, this dour dark dimly lighted place, the smells, don't think of the smells, the accumulated smells of decades. And the other patients, and the other visitors who are mainly women her age and older, whom she has come to recognize at the clinic, as they have come to recognize her, and dread the sight of one another outside the clinic. She is one of the few who takes pains with her appearance, not a vain woman but a woman well aware of her face, her body, how men regard her, or once regarded her, with more than ordinary interest. On this weekday she is wearing an attractive creamy-pale yellow pants suit that is flattering to her shapely body, she thinks, and around her throat

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a peach-colored Italian scarf. Through her life she has been a big-boned beautiful girl yet never what one would call fat, the word *fat* is offensive to her ears, obscene. Her face is round, full-cheeked, her skin slightly flushed as if sunburnt, a classic brunette beauty her husband has called her but now, seeing herself in the rearview mirror of her car on the way home she is shocked by her creased forehead, feathery white lines bracketing her eyes and at the corners of her mouth, the coral lipstick she'd so carefully applied that morning has been eaten off, a little cry of distress escapes her *It is unfair! My face is wearing out, I am still young.* For she is seven years younger than the stricken man in the rehab clinic. How many years she'd been the youngest wife in their social circle. And in her heart, she is the youngest still, and the one men glance at, gaze at with admiration. And turning into Constitution Hill, and onto Westerly Drive, she sees a familiar car parked at a crooked angle partly in the roadway, partly on the shoulder, her sister-in-law's black Toyota so oddly parked, this is a car her seventeen-year-old nephew Jeremy has been driving recently. She feels a tinge of disapproval, neither her brother nor her sister-in-law seem capable of disciplining Jeremy who has been suspended from high school for drugs, threatening other students, threatening a teacher, she knows that Jeremy has a juvenile record for break-ins in his neighborhood near the university. Yet turning into her driveway she ceases thinking of her nephew, the driveway is a steep graveled lane bordered by a straggling evergreen hedge, with her husband so suddenly hospitalized, now in rehab, no one has tended to the property, scarcely she thinks of it, seeing that litter has been blown into the shrubbery, old newspapers and flyers scattered across the lawn, the only time she notices the condition of the property is when she's in the car and as soon as she steps out of the car to enter the house she will forget. Too many things to think of, it's unfair. And now pushing the rear door that opens too readily to her touch, seeing that fleeting shadow against an inner wall. And she thinks with a rush of anger *He believes that I am with Jim, at the clinic and not here. He believes that no one is home.* For it has been said of Trudy Gould that she is a saint, every day at the hospital and now at the rehab clinic, she is selfless, uncomplaining at her husband's bedside for months. She knows how people speak of her, she takes pride in being so spoken of, in fact she is terrified of the empty house, bitterly now she regrets having no children, yes but both she and her husband decided that the risk of adoption was too great, bringing a child of unknown parents into their orderly household. And now entering her kitchen with a deliberate clatter of her heels, expensive Italian-leather shoe boots with a two-inch heel, she feels a thrill of something like defiance, she will not be frightened of her own nephew, tall lanky sloe-eyed Jeremy whom she has known since his birth, Aunt Trudy the boy calls her, or

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called her until two years ago when so much seemed to change in him, still she thinks that Jeremy has always liked her, he would not hurt *her.* Entering the hallway now calling in a scolding voice *Jeremy! I see you* and seeing now that the boy's face is strangely flushed, he is panting and his eyes are dilated and damp, he is on some drug she thinks, yet even now advancing upon him sharp-tongued and scolding *Jeremy! what are you doing here! How dare you* as he springs at her panting like a dog knocking her back against the wall, even now she is disbelieving *He would not hurt me, this is my house* and somehow they are in the kitchen, they are struggling together in the kitchen, a chair is overturned, in his hoarse raw boy's voice Jeremy is crying *Shut up, shut up you old bag, old bitch* even as she screams at him to get away, to stop what he is doing. She slaps at him, blindly Jeremy has snatched up a knife from a kitchen counter, a small paring knife, yet sharp, blindly he is stabbing at her, his aunt whom he seems not to know, does not recognize, astonished Aunt Trudy he has known all his life staring at her now with glassy eyes narrowed to slits, helplessly she lifts her fleshy forearms against him, her outstretched hands to shield herself from the terrible stabbing blows, she is not scolding now, her voice is faltering, pleading now *No no Jeremy please no don't hurt me you don't want to hurt me Jeremy* as the short sharp blade flies at her like a maddened bird of prey, striking her face, her throat, her breasts straining at the now-damp creamy-pale yellow fabric of her jacket top, this furious stranger who resembles her seventeen-year-old nephew will back off from her to leave her sprawled on the sticky kitchen floor to suffocate in her own blood, her lungs have been punctured, her throat is filling up with blood, in something like elation he has thrown down the bloody paring knife, *I told you! I told you! I told you God damn you leave me alone!* He stumbles from the kitchen, runs upstairs though it has been years since he has been upstairs in his aunt's house on Westerly Drive, wildly he rummages through bureau drawers leaving bloody fingerprints, bloody footprints as in an antic dance in the striking baroque design of his Nike soles, man is he high, flying high, this older girl he's crazy for, a girl with whom he shares his drugs, has sex and shares drugs, he will boast to her that he hadn't planned anything of what happened in the rich woman's house, he'd acted out of sheer instinct, he'd told her he knows a house over in Constitution Hill, there's a woman who is gone all day at the hospital with her husband, he did not tell the girl that the woman was his aunt, boasting he'd be safe roaming the house as long as he wanted looking for money and for things to take, over in Constitution Hill where the houses are so large, lots so large and set off from their neighbors, no one will see him and if there's trouble no one will hear it, in that instant of pushing open the door she sees all this, as a single lightning flash can illuminate a nighttime

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landscape of gnarled and unimaginable intricacy, so in that instant she sees, sheerly by instinct she retreats from the door that has swung open too readily to her touch, in the tight-fitting Italian-leather shoe boots she runs stumbling down the gravel driveway, of course she'd seen her sister-in-law's black Toyota parked out of place by the road, she'd recognized the Toyota by the pattern of dents on the rear bumper and by the first letters of the license plate VER, no she will not retreat, certainly she will not retreat, instead she turns the car into the steep gravel driveway, at the rear of the house which is the door she and Jim always use she sees, or thinks she sees, that the door is just slightly ajar, still there is time to retreat, with a part of her brain she knows *I must not go inside, Jim would not want me to go inside* for her responsibility is to her husband back at the clinic waiting for her, but this is her house in which she has lived with her husband Jim Gould for twenty-six years, no one has the right to keep her from entering this house, no one has the right to enter this house without her permission, even a relative, even her shy-sullen sloe-eyed nephew Jeremy, and so with an air of defiance she pushes into the kitchen, clatter of heels on the kitchen tile in that instant seeing a fleeting movement like a shadow in the hall beyond the kitchen, she hears a sharp intake of breath or panting, in that instant a rush of pure adrenalin flooding her veins she refuses to run stumbling and screaming down the gravel drive to summon help, a middle-aged fleshy woman in her early fifties, yet still girlish, in her manner and in her speech, she will not stagger next-door where a Hispanic housekeeper will take her in, in this way save her, dialing 911 as Mrs. Gould collapses onto a kitchen chair winded, panting like a terrified animal, that will not happen, she will not give in to fear, she will not flee from her own house, she will not be saved from suffocating in her own blood, it is her decision, she is Jim Gould's classic brunette beauty, she has never been a vain woman but she thinks well of herself, she is not a weak woman like her sister-in-law and so she will not retreat in undignified haste from her own house, instead she will step forward with a scolding clatter of her shoe-boot heels sharply calling *Jeremy? Is that you?* ●

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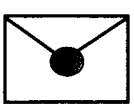

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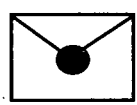

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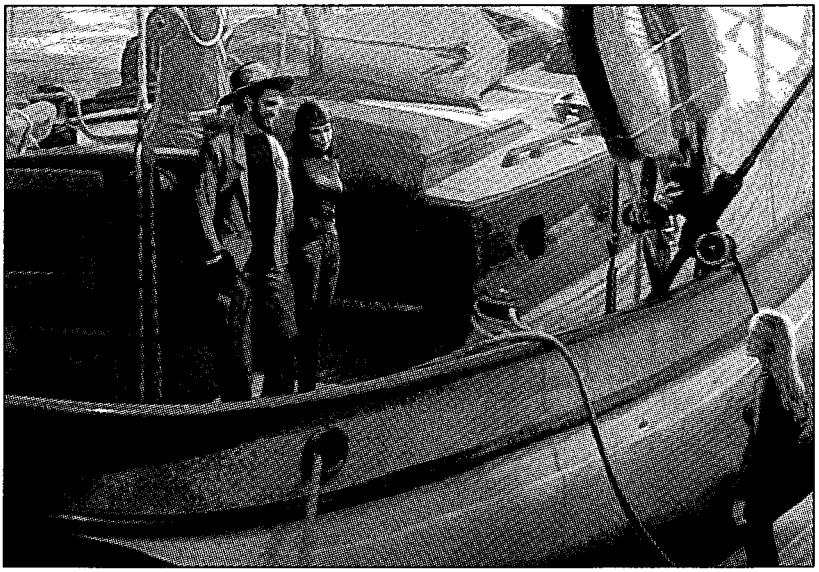

Art by Mark Evans

LAST ISLAND SOUTH

by John C. Boland

Don't *tell* me about sunny Key West. I was painting a small, bad beach scene—just the ticket for some tourist who didn't know yet that he wanted it—working in the cabin of my father's boat, my feet freezing under two pairs of socks, chugging down my second pot of green tea, listening to the *pinkety-pink* of the leak in the head, when Hubbard Bennell hauled his 250 pounds aboard. In his yellow rain slicker, he pretty much filled the galley. "Have you got a job right now, Meggie?" he asked.

His tone implied he knew the question was impolite. Any half-competent investigator could find all the work she wanted in rowdy Key Wasted, couldn't she?

I halfway liked him. He was a middle-aged Conch with sun scabs on the nose and the thickened hands of someone who had done real work before becoming a politico. He'd spent seven or eight years on the city commission without getting indicted, which was close to a local record. After the last municipal scandal over hack licenses, Hub had told a TV reporter that he was sure he wasn't all that honest, no more so than the two commissioners who'd been arrested, so he guessed he was just slower to spot an opportunity. He said it with a melancholy, up-from-under grin. *Dang if it ain't sad what*

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goes on here. A town where city fathers used to import marijuana loves winks and nods.

A job meant money, which I desperately needed.

"Nothing *right now,*" I said.

"Good, you can stake out my flight club. Somebody broke into the office last night."

His flight club was actually an air-charter business, named by some long-ago eccentric who had flown rum over from Cuba. Hub's business, so far as I knew, consisted of hauling tourists seventy miles out into the Gulf of Mexico for snorkeling trips among the Dry Tortugas.

We worked out the terms—that is, Hub told me what the gig was worth and I said okay. Then I called my sometime helper Babe McKenzie, who always needs a few bucks to feed her cats and her boyfriends.

Before dark, I hunkered down in Hub Bennell's office, and Babe hid herself in the converted boathouse that served as a hangar for two island-hopping Cessna 185s. While we were doing that, somebody came ashore at my client's stilt house two miles up the island and shot Hub deader than a crab leg.

I spent a lot of the night talking to the police.

Barry Irvington was my favorite cop when he was looking after me in a paternal way—not so favorite when he felt lonely and thought he needed a girlfriend thirty years younger than himself. Tonight he was red-eyed and rumpled, in a tan suit that belonged in a 'forties movie (one where the emotionally damaged hero washes ashore in the Tropics), his hair damp and finger-combed forward, his breath redolent of cigarettes. He wasn't pretty and he was all business. Bennell had been a successful Key West businessman. He'd also been part of the political establishment. Right there, two strikes against me.

"He said he was worried about theft," I repeated.

"Tell me again. Neither you nor the McKenzie woman saw anything?"

"There was a raccoon about eleven o'clock," I reminded him. "But nobody out to steal an airplane."

He was my friend, but he was also a cop. Five minutes into the interview, he'd checked my gun to see if it had been fired. It hadn't been, not since I'd taken it out to the range two months ago, to satisfy myself I hadn't forgotten everything Dad taught me about shooting. If you're going to do security gigs in Florida, where

John Boland returns to *EQMM* this issue after a long hiatus. The Baltimore author has had a number of stories in our sister publication, *AHMM,* since his last tale for us in 1989. He also authored half a dozen financial mysteries in the 1990s, novels *Publishers Weekly* called "wry and intelligent" and "suspenseful . . . and satisfying." ✝

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everyone who isn't officially a criminal or insane can get a carry permit, it's stupid to work unarmed. I was carrying a Beretta .380 autoloader, which was a little too big for my hand.

Barry and I had already gone through the stuff about how Hub had acted: *not* like he expected someone to shoot him. Babe was getting the third degree, or at least a cup of coffee, in another detective's car.

There was a tap at the window, and the deputy chief of police climbed into the backseat. Curtis LeMoye gave me a sour look. He hadn't liked my father, and he saw no reason to like me.

"Why don't you have her in handcuffs?" he grumbled.

Barry replied, "If she tries to escape, we can shoot her."

LeMoye looked away from me. "We're going to wrap this up, Irvington. I'll leave a couple of guys on the scene. Zelda's done with the body. Thinks he took two straight in the ticker, two in the head."

He got back out into the rain. Barry gave Babe and me a ride back to her pickup truck at the flying club. As she cranked up the engine, she said, "Meggie, did Bennell pay you anything on account?" I had promised her a hundred dollars for the evening.

"No, sorry."

"You're not much of a businesswoman. Always get something on account." She was in her mid forties, chesty as a sailing ship, blond as a swamp fire, opinionated as anyone's mother. In upstate New York, she had been a sheriff's deputy or a hooker, depending on how she felt when she told her story.

"I'll make it up to you," I said.

"I don't see how," Babe responded, and drove off.

Barry took me farther down the Atlantic side of the island to Hawkes' Marina, where the masts of my father's ten-meter fiberglass sailboat slashed the smudgy predawn. Boats can't have premonitions, but this one looked as if it knew it had reached its last berth. Everything about it leaked. My father had been a serious drinker who hadn't had time for boat maintenance. If the bilge pump ever died, the decks would be awash in twenty-four hours.

Dad hadn't been great at family upkeep, either. My mother and I had been living in Connecticut when a cop called and asked if we were related to the Daniel Trevor who had been lost in the Gulf of Mexico. Sailing alone, sixty-eight years old, probably with a celebratory glass of something in hand, toasting the windy sunset, toasting the frigate birds, stumbling on a coiled rope—something like that, dying stupid. A fisherman who came across the drifting boat towed it back to Key West. He refused a salvage claim because he thought Danny Trevor had been a hero. If you hit the right bars in the Lower Keys, CIA pensioners lean on their elbows recalling glory days on the Mosquito Coast. Or they try to remember the name of the guard who wired them up at Isla de Pinos.

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Like high school jocks reliving the big game of '68.

Mom wasn't interested in a half-sunk boat. I was four months out of college with no job in sight, so I came down to clear up the estate. Initially I thought there was nothing but the old ketch, which he called *KeyHole,* thinking it was funny painting a secret code word on the transom. Later I found the compartment in the ceiling, where he had stowed two handguns, one Ithaca side-by-side with jammed works, a couple of gray blocks of something that I knew, having never seen it before, was plastic explosive, and a fully automatic rifle without serial numbers. Altogether, enough to get me twenty years just for being an heir. What had he been planning?

I hadn't told anyone about the compartment. Since the *KeyHole* wasn't seaworthy, I couldn't even haul the contraband out to the Gulfstream for disposal. I didn't know what else to do with it. I could guard a lot of liquor stores without needing a cake of C4. My ex-boyfriend was back in New Haven, and I didn't bear enough of a grudge to send him an exploding package.

When Barry dropped me off, the marina was quiet.

The man sitting in the cockpit of my boat didn't belong there. He wasn't trying to hide, maybe just the opposite, because the cigar tip glowed as I came down the walkway that Mimi Hawkes kept promising to repair. "Meggie," he called—and I recognized the voice and stopped thinking "he."

Apart from the cigar, Gloria Hasty could have been invisible in the dark. Black watch cap, black turtleneck, tight jeans, she was decked out for prowling. The watch cap hid short hair dyed so deeply red it looked metallic under the neon lights along the town's main drag, where she bought dinner for tough boys who could have been her grandsons. We were a mile from Duval Street. Gloria stood up, and the cigar lit one hand well enough that I saw that it was all she was holding. The other hand was pushing back her watch cap.

"I've been waiting here for hours," she complained.

"You should have called." She was one of the few ex-Agency people my father counted as a friend. But it was after four in the morning and my mood was sour. "What do you want?"

"I got a sudden urge to buy one of your paintings, dear. Something with gulls and pelicans. Do you have any like that?" Her tone mocked both of us. My paintings were junk. She *might* hang one in one of the bungalows where her young men slept. A bad painting would be amusing, like the human curiosities. There was a flicker of light behind a curtain in the boat's main cabin. When she saw that I had noticed, Gloria said, "I want you to meet someone, Meggie. Come on out, Tom! Switch on the deck lights."

Blinking as the deck lights popped on, I moved a step closer.

"Tom's housebroken," Gloria announced as a shadow came out of the companionway and onto the aft deck. The shadow was tall and bearded and wore a big floppy safari hat, a black T-shirt, and a

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blazer with buttons that flashed almost as bright at Gloria's cigar butt. He nodded across the space between us.

"You're a pretty bad painter." His beard was mostly white, and behind it he wore a big squinty grin.

"You broke into my boat."

He gave a little shrug. "I'm not really housebroken. I'm Colonel Tom Parker." He didn't expect me to believe him. The name was one of those little jokes, like *KeyHole,* an all-purpose introduction as secret as a two-finger handshake while tugging your left ear: Langley calling.

Stuffing my hands into my pockets, I said, "Pleased to meet you."

"Your old man was one of the great ones," Tom Parker said. Having turned down coffee, he was sitting at the galley table, hands folded, showing a thick wedding band and clean fingernails. "He'd be sorry he didn't get to go out in combat."

If my father was sorry about anything when he died, it would be that he hadn't had time for another Margarita. I didn't think Parker had known him very well.

"Is that how you feel?" I asked. "Hoping to go out in combat?"

"Well, honey—officially I'm retired. Unofficially, I'm still in the game. Both me and Miss Gloria."

Miss Gloria nodded vigorously. "We'd better tell Meggie what's going on. A man named Hector Avila killed your client tonight, honey. Hector steals boats. Your client, Hubbard Bennell, has a boatyard. Guess what happens there?"

"I don't know."

Tom Parker stepped in. "The stolen boats get a new profile, fresh paint, brand new nameplate, made-to-order log books. Then some wetback takes 'em across to Veracruz—that's the city named for the True Cross, kid—and they get sold to South Americanos who can afford both a hundred-foot boat *and* two mistresses. Hector Avila would steal the eyeballs off a corpse if there was a peso in it."

"Where's the boatyard?"

"Little east of Stock Island."

"And why do you care?"

"CIA pension don't stretch that far," said Colonel Tom Parker. "But the marine-insurance people pay us pretty good. If we disrupt Avila's export business, recover the last boat he pinched at Little Palm, me and Miss Gloria will clear about seventy-five K."

"So you broke into my boat looking for Avila."

"Naw, kid. I broke in 'cause I got bored waiting. Now the good news. If you want to help us, we're good for a few hundred bucks. Help us a lot, there's more." He glanced around the cabin, which probably smelled musty if you hadn't been living there. "Danny's old boat looks like it could use repairs."

The *KeyHole* needed more than repairs. The slip fee was due. My

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phone was running out of minutes. I had about seventy dollars to my name. For some reason—maybe it was the cold snap—tourists weren't buying my paintings. I had been looking forward to a check from Hub Bennell.

"Why did Avila kill Mr. Bennell?" I asked Gloria.

"There's no honor among thieves, Meggie. Even less with Hectorcito. I believe Tom is going to have to take him out."

Tom nodded confidently.

Colonel Tom and Gloria shoved off before dawn, plowing across the small harbor in a Zodiac. I checked the hidden compartment, but there was no sign Tom had discovered it. His poking around seemed to have been random—correct that: eighty percent random, twenty percent perverted, which served me right for leaving personal items where the old creep could find them. I caught a few hours' sleep with the hatches open, to blow out the stink of Gloria's cigar.

By morning, the breeze pushing through the boat was warm, with a taste of Havana in it. I kicked off a sweaty sheet, plodded down to the marina for a shower, and then went across the road to the Carbuncle, a bikers' dive, and ate chili for breakfast. Lem Samuel, the half-owner, claims the same kettle of chili has been simmering since the afternoon Nixon resigned. He had been letting me eat free because I was working on a portrait of him. His gray-streaked hair was almost Biblical in length, his bloodshot eyes could have been traced with red liner, and jailhouse X's were tattooed on the backs of his fingers. I would have painted him for free.

"You want a beer?" he said.

It was eight-twenty in the morning.

"I can't afford a beer."

"You dance here on Friday night, I'll pay you a hundred bucks."

"A hundred wouldn't cover the antibiotics."

"Eat the chili, Meggie, it cures everything. Look at me. I don't do doctors." He leaned on the bar. "You hear about the murder?"

I waved him away. I didn't want to talk about it.

"They say he was stabbed a dozen times right in his shop on Duval Street."

I put down my spoon. "Who are we talking about?"

"Art dealer, important guy, Anders Hewitt. I don't suppose he sells *your* paintings." Grinning at close range, Lem showed me teeth that should have been in a mummy case. "Now let me ask you, what's a rich guy doing in his gallery at five in the morning? That's when he called the cops and spilled out onto the sidewalk."

I still couldn't face a beer, but I ordered a strong cup of coffee. That pot, too, had been brewing since the day Nixon resigned.

Duval Street commerce was at its finest. There were baby sharks in bottles, President bobbleheads, T-shirts with stale obscenities, then the art galleries—only one of those was roped off with yellow

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tape forcing pedestrians to walk into the street. A biker chewing on his wrist strap had one foot down, leaning toward a sweaty cop, whom I recognized as one of Deputy Chief Curtis LeMoye's boys so I steered clear. There were blood spatters on the sidewalk outside the gallery, and the cop had his left heel in one of them. He was too busy chatting with the fellow on the V-8 to notice me peering in the shop window. The Last Island Gallery specialized in high-end art, oil paintings by people who had reputations, sculptures that looked liked they had come from Mayan ruins. Anders Hewitt, the late owner, got his picture in the newspaper every time the Arts Council donated a dollar to the homeless.

Barry Irvington came out of the gallery.

"Tell me you weren't guarding Anders Hewitt," he said.

"I wasn't."

"You want breakfast?"

The chili rumbled in my stomach. I shook my head. "What happened to Hewitt?"

"Fourteen knife wounds, started bleeding inside the store, made it to the sidewalk." Barry walked me down the street, away from the biker and the cop. "We've got no weapon, no video, about a thousand fingerprints. I was hoping it's a domestic thing, then there'd be a chance of solving it. But Hewitt lived with his sister, who says he was as sexless as a bee. No beefs with artists or customers. A wide circle of friendships, nothing intimate."

For a minute I thought he was talking to himself, running through all the things he didn't have. Then he said, "One of his friends was Hubbard Bennell."

He was doing his job, trying to solve a couple of murders. I was doing mine, trying to make a living—which Tom Parker and Gloria's gig promised to further. When I thought of one man with four bullets in him and another with fourteen stab wounds, I knew I was out of my class. I said, "Has the name Hector Avila turned up?"

"Where did you hear it?"

"Gloria Hasty paid me a visit last night. She had an old CIA type tagging along. They said Avila is a boat thief and that he killed Hub."

Barry made a sour face. "How does Gloria know that?"

"Does Hub have a boatyard?"

"Yeah. . . ."

I told him Tom Parker's version of boat hijacking and refitting. As we talked, he thumbed through his notebook. "A couple of invoices at Hewitt's gallery show payments to an 'H. Avila' for art."

"So struggling artists survive stealing boats."

"Avila isn't struggling. Hewitt paid him an average of fifty thousand a month for most of last year. In fact—" he leafed back—"since April the payments added up to almost exactly fifty a month. Before that, it was thirty-five. Steady as rain. What does that have to do with stealing boats?"

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We drove in an unmarked car across the bridge onto Stock Island and spotted the sign SAILHOOK MARINA arching above a side road like a leaping marlin. The sign offered boatyard services and storage. A handful of slips beside a concrete pier were empty except for a couple of pontoon boats with open, empty decks.

In the repair yard, two men were spray-coating the bottom of a cabin cruiser. When they saw Barry they removed their masks and switched off the compressor. He didn't need to flash a badge. He probably didn't need to put his fists on his hips, pushing back his jacket to reveal the gun on his hip, but he did.

"Who owns the boat?"

The smaller man was round, pale, and half bald. He wore a basketball shirt that exposed the red hair on his shoulders. "Calvin Bordreaux owns her, has for twenty years. You know Calvin?"

Barry looked the boat over. It didn't fit the description I'd got from Gloria of the yacht stolen from the resort at Little Palm Island. It was stubby and old, needed varnish, and even with a clean bottom it looked too shabby to motor into a high-end resort. "What's Calvin use her for?" Barry asked.

"He takes his wife out on Florida Bay and they listen to the radio. Maybe pretend to fish."

"Have you had anything bigger in the yard? Say about fifty-five feet, Danish design. Called *Bay Stomper?*"

The other man, whose neck tattoos twined dripping daggers with skulls and butterflies, pointed to the boat slips. "Mr. Hub had one like that in the marina ten, twelve days ago. We didn't do any work on it."

His companion nodded. "Nice boat, but not the one you want. This was *Morning Glory,* out of Boca. Not much crew, one real mean Cuban. Told me to stay away from his boat."

Barry was still sizing them up. For a yard that was supposed to refit stolen boats, the men seemed too relaxed. "You fellows usually work on boats like that?"

"I'd sure like to," said the tattooed man.

"Have you worked here long?"

"Three years. But we do mostly small jobs, right, Hank?"

The red-haired man nodded.

As we walked around the yard, Barry said, "If this is a marine chop shop, I'm Jimmy Buffett. I've seen Hank at bars. He's a lay preacher of some sort."

"In bars?"

"Where would you expect to find lost souls? Next time, don't believe everything Gloria Hasty tells you."

"What about the *Bay Stomper*? And Hector Avila? Avila could have painted a new name on."

"First, we only have Gloria's word a boat was stolen. It hasn't

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been reported to the Coast Guard."

"A 'mean Cuban' could fit Avila."

Barry nodded. "There was no address for Avila on Anders Hewitt's invoices. Not much description of what Hewitt was buying, either—just 'work of art.' Did your two CIA pals mention whether Avila was an artist?"

"They said he was a killer." Hands tucked into my back pockets, I watched the water. A couple of porpoises had come into the sheltered area herding baitfish. "They've got a source in your department, you know. A couple hours after Bennell got shot, Gloria and Parker were waiting on my boat, pitching the idea that Avila did it. There was a pretty good bet I would tell you."

We drove back to town. Barry put a description of the *Morning Glory* out to local marinas. If you're going to start searching for a single boat in the Lower Keys, you might as well also try naming frigate birds. He queried the national crime database on the name Hector Avila, got a dozen small charges from the 'nineties and an array of old mug shots. The most recent picture showed a narrow-faced man with long black hair. The men at Sailhook described their Cuban as over six feet, short-haired, and scrawny as a wood stork. The database had no current address on Avila.

Finding Tom Parker was easier. He had a suite at the Hilton looking down onto Mallory Square, where the pagans gather to celebrate sunset. Barry decided we should visit Parker in his room.

Two steps off the elevator, we heard a door open. A porky fellow in a gray suit stepped into the hall. I got a glimpse of a black brush cut, pug nose, bee-stung lips. He said a few words to someone in the room, then turned away from us and headed for a back stairway.

Barry unfroze. "That's Lieutenant Kilgallen. He's LeMoye's assistant."

"Assistant what?"

"Whatever the deputy chief needs, Larry Kilgallen fetches."

"What do you want to bet, that's Parker's room he came out of."

"I wouldn't bet."

"Let's go see."

"Let's not." He turned and pushed the elevator button. The car hadn't gone anywhere. We went down to the lobby, out onto the square. It had turned into a bright, hot day, and a cruise ship was unloading a couple thousand tourists onto the pier, each of whom might buy a T-shirt or lunch, or get his pocket picked more directly, in any case contributing to the gross domestic product of the Conch Republic. The town had called itself a republic ever since a short-lived confrontation with the feds a quarter-century ago proved its rebellious spirit. When Dad took me on a boat ride out toward Fort Jefferson, spotting the sunken drug planes, he pointed out that none of them had carried untaxed English tea.

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He thought Key West should be called the Contraband Republic.

It was close to lunchtime. Barry got us a table on the square, ordered a Bloody Mary that put a little color in his cheeks. I had a diet ginger ale. "What do you think?" I said.

He found things to look at that didn't include my eyes, which usually distracted him. The question hadn't really come up, but I had assumed Barry Irvington was an honest cop, however you define that. He might look the other way for a friend—he had done so when I was getting wrecked saying goodbye to Dad—but I didn't think he would look the other way because someone slipped him money.

His glance finally got around to me. "If Kilgallen and LeMoye have something going on, I don't want to know about it. I could get used to living without my badge. Maybe I could get along without a pension. But I don't want DEA getting a tip and finding a half-kilo of dope in my car. If it happened, nobody in the Department would jump up and say, 'No, they got it all wrong, Irv's a good cop.' "

"What about Parker?"

"Do you know Parker from before?"

"No. Dad didn't bring his coworkers home. Parker says he's retired."

"Call him up and invite him down to lunch. I'll be somewhere else. Tell him you need a few bucks so you can keep looking for Avila's boat. Bat your pretty eyes at him."

I used the Hilton's house phone, and Parker came downstairs ten minutes later. He joined me at the table Barry had vacated. In daylight he looked older and flabby and the white beard had a yellow tinge. He was wearing a baby-blue guayabera shirt, cotton ducks, leather sandals over argyle socks. I wondered if this was a CIA-approved disguise. "You're buying lunch," I said. "I'm tapped out."

"I think I can manage that, kid."

"Also, I need a couple hundred on account."

That widened his eyes. "On account of what?"

"If you're looking for Avila, it'd help to put out word in the Cuban community. I can do that."

He understood. There were bars in town where Anglo hombres weren't welcome but an Anglo chick would get free drinks. "Also, if there's money for whoever dimes him, it might go faster," I said.

"Okay, two hundred."

"You better make it five for the tipster. They need to believe you're serious."

He looked like he was passing a kidney stone. "All right. But the info's got to be good."

I ate a big lunch at Parker's expense, collected two hundred dollars, and left him fumbling a credit card onto the check. A block later, Barry fell in beside me. "You'd better stay out of his way. He'll know he was had. Parker had copies of police reports on last night's murders. I'll bet Larry Kilgallen left his prints on them."

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"You hit Parker's room?"

"Crudely, too. Turned the place upside down. Borrowed an envelope at the front desk and mailed the reports to a lawyer. Parker also had mug shots of Avila, a nice little Walther .380 with two magazines. Hasn't been fired for a while. Couple of phony ID's. This guy is a clown."

"He knows where my boat is," I pointed out.

"Move in with me, he'll never find you."

"I'll move in somewhere, but not with you."

He tried not to look disappointed. I liked him a lot, but the poor guy was in his fifties.

I cleaned the stuff I needed out of my boat, made a deal with Babe McKenzie for a couple nights' bivouac for a hundred dollars. She reminded me I owed her a hundred for the other night. She had a one-bedroom apartment in a decayed mansion close enough to Old Town that I wouldn't need transportation. She let me have the couch and a corner of the fridge that wasn't stuffed with cat food.

I met Barry at Anders Hewitt's gallery and we took another look at the invoices made out to H. Avila. There were eighteen of them. None had an address or tax-ID number for Avila. The descriptions of the art Hewitt was buying were as skimpy as Barry had remembered, but the recorded amounts weren't small: between eight thousand and twenty thousand dollars.

"That stuff should stand out even here," Barry said. He led me through the gallery. There were five rooms. The blood spill was confined to the front gallery, where touristy stuff was on display. It was still high-end. The oil paintings of breaching killer whales—and when has anyone seen those off Key West?—were glossy and big, the kind hotels might hang in the lobby. Another room held paintings that didn't have a local theme—still-lifes, landscapes, portraitists' samples. Next-door was a den full of glass sculptures, some of them extraordinarily beautiful if you went for that sort of thing . . . and didn't live on a rocking boat. There was a big, blue cresting wave so convincing that I looked for a surfer atop the glass. A little card beside each sculpture identified the artist and title and the nature of the glass. Beside the price was a small number-letter code.

"Are there numbers on Avila's invoices?" I asked Barry.

He flipped through the pages. "A series: PC47, PC51, PC52, PC55, and so on."

A large room at the end of a hall was filled with works tagged PC. The letters might have stood for pre-Columbian. H. Avila's PC52 was a fat, malevolently ugly stone head the size of a pumpkin. The discreet little card said it was an Olmec deity, from circa 1,100 B.C. The price was fifty-five thousand dollars.

"Rents are high on Duval Street," Barry murmured.

We scouted the rest of the room. There were twenty or thirty

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other items, most of them smaller than the head. They stood on tables, on Lucite shelves, in clear boxes. My guess about the meaning of "PC" was probably wrong. Some looked Mediterranean, others Asian. The lowest price was ten thousand dollars.

We couldn't match any of the other items to Avila invoices. "Maybe Avila's pieces sold," I said. "Do you think the stuff's authentic?"

"Maybe I'd better get someone in who knows," Barry said.

As we reached the front, a voice snapped, "What's she doing here?"

Curtis LeMoye's sparse pink comb-over looked like it had just come in from the rain instead of from the sunny sidewalk. He could bake in the desert for a week and still look moist. The deputy chief had been leaning on a desk, studying an eight-foot-long nude painting that looked like a Modigliani. Maybe he planned to open a bar and needed a conversation piece.

"She has information that may help us," Barry said. He told LeMoye that a man fitting Hector Avila's description had briefly parked a boat at Bennell's marina. "It looks like he also provided art to this gallery. That links him to both murders."

"Do we have a picture—a description?"

"The photos are ten years old."

"He's Cuban, right? I'll run him by some of my contacts." He looked at me. "I wish the CIA stayed out of Key West."

I didn't know how to answer that, so I told Barry I was glad to help and got out of there.

Gloria Hasty had a nineteenth-century house of Honduran mahogany facing Eaton Street, with two cottages around back behind a twenty-foot swimming pool. The cottages were where she put up her occasional boys, as she called them. There was no point in ringing at the front door. I opened the gate and went around back.

Gloria was in her swimming pool.

She was still wearing her midnight-prowler gear, minus the watch cap, so the red hair was a spiky halo. The pool was about eight feet deep at this end, and light and shadows wiggled on the surface, making it hard to tell exactly what I was seeing. Gloria appeared to have a spear of some kind through her chest. Her eyes and mouth were wide open. The alarmed girl on the pool apron with the sky behind her must have looked remote and useless from Gloria's perspective.

"Turn around, dammit."

I turned and came face to face with someone I hadn't expected to see again. He wore a few days' gray stubble, hair and brows were salt-lightened, cheeks were deeply sunken. He was holding a sawed-off shotgun. His eyes were hard and, for just an instant, murderous.

Still, it was the face I knew best, and missed most.

I said, "Hi, Dad."

I wanted to hug him and blubber as if I were ten years old. But I

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was twenty-two and knew I had to make adult judgments about people, even him.

"Where did you get the shotgun?"

"From the house. Meggie, I heard you were down here. You look good. How's your mom?"

Dating someone stable, I almost said. No point in taking cheap shots.

"Why were you in the house?"

"Looking for Gloria."

"She's in the pool."

He took two steps, looked, muttered, "That's great." I couldn't tell how he meant it.

We did our catching-up in one of the cottages. Dad perched on a chair where he could watch the yard. He was impressed that an old drinking buddy had towed the *KeyHole,* bemused that I was living aboard at the same slip he had used. He asked how I was making a living, and when I told him, he laughed a little. But the laugh was feeble. For the first time, he looked not just old but worn out.

"What happened to you?" I asked.

"Gloria and I took the boat out, and she pushed me overboard. She and I were—well, you know, spending time together. We had a lot in common."

"I see," I said crustily. Loyalty to Mom and all that.

"I was doing a little job, keeping an eye on some of the locals here. Gloria saw an angle." He shrugged. "I was in the water two days, got picked up by a freighter headed for Tampico. It took a couple of months in the hospital before I was half-fit. One bullet messed me up a little."

"*One* bullet?"

"She shot me a few times. Thorough lady, when she put her mind to something."

"What did she do with the *KeyHole?*"

"Probably set it adrift a few miles out and took her Zodiac. She brought the inflatable in case we wanted to explore the mangroves. Nobody knew we'd gone out together."

"She told me last night she was looking for Hector Avila."

"Yeah?"

I told him about what had happened in town, and about Gloria and Parker's visit.

"Describe the guy calling himself Parker."

"Bearded, heavy, six-one, big wedding band, talk of not being housebroken, officially retired, called me kid." I added, "He said you would be sorry you didn't go out in combat."

"But I did." His smile was ragged. "The Parker description could fit a half-dozen guys I can think of. If he's any good, he changes his appearance anyway."

"According to Parker, Avila is running stolen boats to Mexico. He

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and Gloria said they were working an insurance angle."

"Do you believe that?"

"No. Avila was supplying art to Hewitt's gallery."

"Avila's not in the art trade. He launders money for wise guys in Miami. He uses a boatyard, Hewitt's gallery, probably a dozen other businesses that will do anything for ten percent. Gloria decided to take him out. She offered me first crack at the deal."

"You didn't agree?"

"I told her that messing with Avila was a fast way to get dead."

"Tell me how the money-laundering works."

"A guy like Anders Hewitt picks up a bunch of junk art, doesn't matter what sort, creates a history. Supposedly it's on consignment from an importer. It's garbage. In a real sale, you couldn't unload it for five grand. But he writes up a bill of sale for a hundred thousand, runs the money through his bank account, keeps ten or fifteen as his fee. Avila gets eighty-five thousand of his clients' money back. Bingo, the capital is on deposit in Lauderdale or Miami for an import company owned by the wise guys. It started off as maybe racetrack skim or vigorish. Now it's clean enough for casual inspection. The gallery owner's biggest problem is deciding whether to report the fifteen thousand as income." He yawned hugely. "I've been running on empty for a week. Got in twenty hours ago on a shrimp boat. Can I crash on the *KeyHole?*"

"Parker knows about the boat." I told him about Sergeant Irvington ransacking Parker's room. "He also had a visit from Lieutenant Kilgallen, who slipped out the back way like he didn't want to be seen. Barry says Kilgallen is Deputy Chief LeMoye's man."

"Larry Kilgallen is one of the locals I was asked to watch."

"Who asked you?"

He cracked an ugly grin. "People who knew I would work cheap. I don't think they know Parker's involved. And I never got a chance to tell them about Gloria."

He slept for three hours while I kept watch. None of Gloria's occasional boys was in residence. Nobody came around looking for her—or to clean the swimming pool. The only person besides us who knew about the body was the person who had put it there.

While he slept, I kept looking at him. I thought about calling Mom with the news, but she had had enough of this man for one lifetime. What had started out as heroic and romantic had gone bad. He had signed on during the Cold War believing everything, and had ended up believing nothing. And now . . . he had been in town twenty hours. Twenty hours ago, Bennell, Hewitt, and Gloria had been alive.

He got up late in the afternoon. When he'd had a shower and some coffee and food, we talked about stuff that had nothing to do with the case. He didn't apologize for being a lousy husband or absent father. He had taught me to sail, and to shoot, and maybe to be too independent. Looking at me, he said he thought he'd done a good job.

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After dark, he went into the water and pulled Gloria out. Wrapping her in a sheet, I saw more than I wanted to. The shaft through her body was a long African tribal knife, but it hadn't made her only wound. She had been tortured. I went behind a tree and threw up.

Dad carried the body into the main house. Then we spent two hours in Bahama Village, making the rounds of places where he had friends. Twice we heard that a fat white guy without much money also was asking around. But nobody had seen Hector Avila in more than a week. That crazy Cuban? Oh, yessir, Mr. Danny, he likes them Chinese prostitutes upstairs of the bike rental. Yessir, that's Hectorcito, same one as cut Shem the Tailor's hamstring, Shem who specializes in pharmaceuticals.

It was a matter of time before Parker heard we were out there.

About one-thirty in the morning, a kid with a shaved head, awning-striped shirt, black trousers, shiny black tap shoes, and red suspenders came up to the bar at Puccini's and handed Dad a note. The boy waited until I gave him five dollars, then ran out the door. Dad showed me the note, which said: 4 A.M. Room 407.

"That's Parker's hotel room."

He nodded.

"We don't want to go there," I said.

"You're not going. Parker and I've got business. Let's camp at the boat for a while."

I sat on deck in the dark while Dad used the head. He came topside carrying the knapsack I usually kept my paints in. Without asking I knew he had a gun in it. Under my breath, I said, "I'm coming with."

He sat beside me. "You've never shot anyone, have you?" He took my silence as assent.

"We should be calling the cops."

"Probably," he agreed. I couldn't see his eyes in the darkness, couldn't tell what was there. "But that's not how Parker and I play."

"I thought you didn't know him."

"I don't, but I know the type."

Of course he did. The type was just like himself.

Colonel Tom Parker wasn't alone, but we hadn't expected him to be. Even indoors he was wearing the big safari hat. He also had a body-armor vest on his torso, the Walther holstered on his hip, and a small machine pistol hanging from his shoulder. But he had the courtesy bar open, and he was making a show of being hospitable, putting out whiskey and mixers alongside a can of nuts. "Make yourselves comfortable," he said.

Lieutenant Kilgallen sat at a table near the window, watching us from slitted eyes, puffy lips set, a reef of cash in front of him held together with rubber bands.

The only surprise I got was finding Barry Irvington sitting next

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to Kilgallen. He had his fingers laced behind his head like a spectator who didn't find the proceedings interesting. He didn't look at me. I thought, *Oh, crap.* It was my day for disappointments.

Dad dropped the knapsack onto the sofa, and nodded to Parker. "Hi, Lou."

"Hi, yourself." Lou's grin was almost as big as his hat. "Took a year off my life when I spotted you walking around Bahama Village tonight. When Gloria says she's done someone, I thought I could take her word for it. She used to be better."

"She wasn't bad."

I leaned against the wall beside the front door. Lou, or whoever he was, winked at me. "Some girl you got there, Dan. First off, I'm sorry about Hector. I know he was your boy, but he had to go."

I shot my father a look, but he was watching the stack of money in front of Kilgallen. Without moving his head, he said, "What happened to him?"

"Gloria figured there wasn't room for all three of us, and she liked me better." The beard split in a grin.

"Two's better than three," my father agreed.

Listening to him, my heart sank.

Kilgallen cleared his throat. "Avila went in the gulf last week. Guess he didn't float as well as you did, Dan. By the way, doing you was Gloria's move. I wasn't consulted. I got nothin' against you. Are we okay?"

"Yeah."

"Good." He patted the cash. "This is your cut of what we did through December. Figured it might square things."

"It'll help."

"Okay. Let's get to our problem. We got two dead people that have to be explained. Sergeant Irvington here has kindly volunteered to be the fall guy. It won't be airtight, but it'll work."

Barry's glance met mine. For the first time, I noticed that the hands behind his head were manacled.

"Why would he have killed Bennell and Hewitt?" Dad asked.

Kilgallen lifted his shoulders. "Greed. We pass the hat, put twenty grand in his bank account. That would buy a local cop. Then we have a scenario. Crooked cop gets caught and eats his gun. We're covered. The money-scrubbing business goes quiet for a while. Three months from now, we're back up and running. No one from Miami gets bent out of shape, except at Avila, who's run off with their money. You're the only one we gotta bring on board, Dan."

"What about Gloria Hasty?"

"What about her?" Kilgallen said.

"She's dead."

Kilgallen's head turned. "Lou?"

Lou didn't apologize. "One of those things. It can fit the cop. Okay with you, Danny?"

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"Just fine. So which of you took care of Bennell and Hewitt?"

"Gloria." He stopped playing with the whiskey bottle. "They'd gotten cold feet. She did it nice and clean with Bennell but lost it on Hewitt."

"Okay. Why Gloria, Lou?"

"She had Avila's boat. There's about two million in good checks on it." Lou tapped his big fingers nervously on the top of the machine gun. "I got the location out of her this afternoon."

"Where's the boat?" Kilgallen demanded.

Kilgallen and Lou stared at each other.

"We'll talk about that later," Lou said.

"Yeah, we will. That leaves who deals with Irv. Any volunteers?"

I couldn't look at Barry. He had befriended me, had helped me over rough ground. If I hadn't told him about Parker, he wouldn't be here.

"Volunteers?" Kilgallen repeated.

"Guess it's my turn," my father said. My heart dropped. He took a big handgun from his jacket and was two steps from Barry when Lou complained, "Cripes, not *here!* It's my room. Besides, if people are going to believe the cop did it, we got to set the stage."

"What do you suggest?"

"Take the cop over to Gloria's. She's dead in the pool. Shoot him with her piece. Like the lieutenant says, it'll work."

My father rubbed his chin. "We'll have to drive. Who's got a car?"

"Dad," I said. I owed him a warning. Behind me, I had my gun out.

Lou looked at me, and his hand moved a little on the machine gun. "Uh, Danny, we got a problem. Your kid is pals with Irvington."

"She's just stringing him for me," my father said.

"You still shoulda known better than to bring her."

Lou had the machine gun. When there's one in the room, you can't point a handgun and tell the guy to drop it. Both men had had the same training. Lou was about half a second late in realizing that in getting close to the fall guy, Dad had closed the distance with him, too. The protective vest he wore had a vulnerable area at the armholes. It's where unlucky police officers catch one now and then. Dad was at the wrong angle for that. He shot Lou in both knees faster than you can say the words, and the heavy man went down too shocked to scream. Before Kilgallen could move, Dad had a knee on Lou's back and was aiming across the table.

I stepped away from the door to have a better angle on the lieutenant. His hand twitched toward his jacket. He scowled. "What's this, Dan? You want everything for yourself?"

Dad wagged the pistol. "Pull your gun, Larry."

Kilgallen thought about it and shook his head. Then he blustered. "This is a stupid move."

"Not for me."

I said, "Dad. . . ."

"Last chance to go for your gun, Larry."

Kilgallen sat stock-still.

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"No? Let me tell you something that might change your mind. Hector Avila was my friend. He also was an undercover Treasury agent. That makes killing him a capital crime. So, Larry: Are you sure you don't want to try for your gun?"

Kilgallen kept his hands still. "I'll take my chances in court," he said.

When you sit with your father at a comfy restaurant, enjoying the sunset and the Straits wind, nibbling stone crab and Margaritas, it's not a good time to say you were ready to shoot him. Not an ideal time to admit just how close he'd come, when he was moving toward my favorite cop.

"I couldn't tell you the truth when I thought Hector was alive," Dad said, as if that little fib was the only thing between us. "Gloria, Kilgallen, Bennell, and Hewitt were running the local laundry operation. It wasn't a stable partnership even before Gloria decided to take out Avila and keep the money."

"She said there was no honor among thieves," I said.

"Once Gloria had the checks, she had to clean up the scene. Bennell and Hewitt had to go. She was leading Lou around by the nose searching for Hector's boat, which she already had." He chuckled in admiration. "I figure Lou got her just before she would've gotten him."

He still looked haggard, after twenty hours' sleep and a medical checkup at taxpayer expense. We had spent the afternoon arguing about the *KeyHole.* He wanted me to keep the boat, while I wanted to go back to Connecticut. He planned to be in Miami for a while.

"Get the damned explosives off the boat and I'll think about it," I said.

"They're gone." He set his drink down. He'd had several, was in a mood to have more. We were in the last port south, and the drinking flag was up. "What do you think I had in the knapsack? That was my fallback position."

"What—blow up the hotel?" He'd spent several minutes on the boat. I hadn't guessed why.

"I didn't know who we were dealing with till we got there," he reminded me. "If there were more cops, if it wasn't just Kilgallen, I might have had to run a bluff. Anyway, if the bag blew, it wouldn't have gone beyond the room."

"*We* were in the room."

He looked at me oddly. "I told you I didn't want you along."

His coldness sank in, and for the first time I understood how he could have abandoned Mom and me. How he could shoot another man faster than a coin hits the floor. The emptiness in this man I had always loved was a mile deep. Too deep for me to continue to care about him.

He flicked a hand at a waiter, who came with another drink. ●

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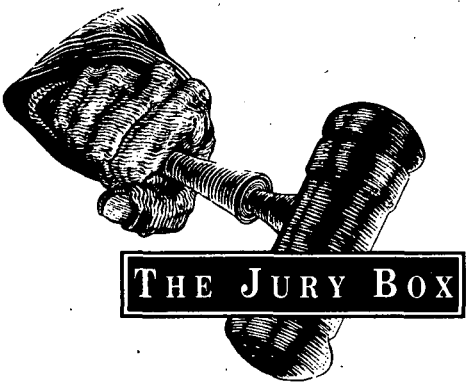

by Jon L. Breen

Why are so many writers who already have serious reputations in the wider world of literature turning to crime fiction? It could be the realization that the genre, far from limiting comment and creativity, offers infinite possibilities for exploring serious themes and societal mores. It could be dissatisfaction with the downgrading of plot in so-called literary fiction. In many cases, it is undoubtedly a commercial decision, in recognition of the shrinking audience for general fiction. Whatever the reason, many have made significant contributions, e.g. Joyce Carol Oates, James Lee Burke, and Michael Chabon. Invaders from the mainstream are especially welcome when they come not to subvert or "transcend" the genre but rather, armed with a knowledge and appreciation of its history and conventions, to practice it with a high level of skill. Take the recent example of Benjamin Black, pseudonym of Booker Prize winner John Banville, who demonstrates that a whodunit can keep the reader guessing without distorting or falsifying the characters.

**** Benjamin Black: *The Lemur*, Picador, $13. Burnt-out investigative journalist John Glass, an Irishman transplanted to Manhattan, is asked by his father-in-law, communications tycoon and former CIA agent Big Bill Mulholland, to write his biography. The Lemur of the title is researcher-for-hire Dylan Riley, who hints at blackmail and is murdered, leaving Glass to figure out who killed him and what family secret he had uncovered. The novel is beautifully written, admirably brief, and effective both as character study and mystery.

**** Ruth Rendell: *Not in the Flesh*, Crown, $25.95. Rendell achieved a serious literary reputation while working within the crime-fiction genre. Her Chief Inspector Wexford's debut, *From Doon With Death*, appeared in 1964, making the English cop one of the longest active current sleuths. He

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remains in excellent form in a case involving an eleven-years-dead murder victim, whose skeleton is uncovered by a truffle-sniffing dog, and an ailing novelist on Biblical themes whose odd household includes both an ex-wife and a current one. A subplot concerns the appalling practice of female genital mutilation among Somali immigrants.

*** Laura Lippman: *Another Thing to Fall*, Morrow, $24.95. Baltimore private eye Tess Monaghan takes a job babysitting an accident-plagued TV series's female star, whose unhealthy thinness and apparent vacuity are both pathetic and terrifying. Some of the characters, particularly one of Tess's unlikely night-school students, are hard to believe, but the depiction of the city and of TV production are rich in amusing insights.

*** Max Allan Collins: *Strip for Murder*, illustrations by Terry Beatty, Berkley, $14. In 1953 Manhattan, former stripper Maggie Starr returns to the stage in a Broadway musical based on Hal Rapp's hillbilly comic strip *Tall Paul*, leaving her Goodwinesque stepson Jack in charge of their newspaper syndicate. Was the death of Rapp's bitter rival Sam Fizer, creator of the classic boxing strip *Mug O'Malley*, suicide or murder? The second in this good series offers conflicting clues, compulsive punning, period cultural references, and more thinly-disguised figures from the show biz and comics worlds, culminating in a Queenian challenge to the reader delivered via Beatty's cartoons.

*** Parnell Hall: *The Sudoku Puzzle Murders*, St. Martin's Minotaur/Dunne, $23.95. As regular readers know, alleged Puzzle Lady Cora Felton couldn't solve or construct a crossword to save her life, but it turns out she's a whiz at sudokus. Both types of puzzles figure in a case involving two Japanese publishers, who are professional and romantic rivals, and a stolen samurai sword. Much of the bright dialogue, albeit used as an extending ingredient, is very funny, and the denouement features one of the most unusual comic courtroom scenes in fictional annals. Four sudokus of varying difficulty are credited to *New York Times* and NPR puzzle maven Will Shortz.

*** Mary Higgins Clark: *Where Are You Now?*, Simon and Schuster, $25.95. Ten years ago, Columbia University senior Mack MacKenzie disappeared, his only communications with his family annual phone calls on Mother's Day. When his younger sister Carolyn sets out to find him, a wonderfully complicated plot involving a large cast is set in motion. You don't read Clark for her prose, dialogue, or characterization (all serviceable at best), but her gift for story structure and personnel management explains her status as perennial bestseller.

*** Katherine Hall Page: *The Body in the Gallery*, Morrow, $23.95. Faith Fairchild, caterer and pastor's wife in small-town Massachusetts, takes over the

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local museum's restaurant operation in order to find out who replaced a friend's donated artwork with a forgery. The titular body is a young shaven-headed woman who has taken the place of a goldfish in one of the alleged artworks on display. Ultimately the domestic side, including a subplot on the alarming phenomenon of cyberbullying, is more interesting than the mystery. This is a lesser entry in a literate, informative, and often amusing series that is always worth reading.

*** Dennis Palumbo: *From Crime to Crime*, Tallfellow, $24.95. In acknowledged homage to Isaac Asimov's Black Widowers (to the extent that the ultimate detective is a mutton-chopped elder named Isaac), the suburban husbands of the Smart Guys Marching Society turn their Sunday afternoon male-bonding sessions to armchair detection. Their *EQMM* debut, a locked-room mystery, is joined by eight cases new to print (with a dying message and ghost sightings among the trappings) and three non-series tales, one new and one (from *The Strand*) casting a young Albert Einstein as detective. While some of the plots stretch credulity (as did some of Asimov's), classical detection buffs will enjoy these good-humored puzzles.

*** David Ossman: *The Ronald Reagan Murder Case*, BearManor, $19.95. In 1945 Hollywood, 25-year-old director and radio star George Tirebiter encounters murders old (a 1920 case combining elements of William Desmond Taylor and Thomas Ince) and new (a Reagan lookalike found wearing a duck suit in the Santa Monica surf by Lt. Reagan himself). Considering Tirebiter's origin in the satirical Firesign Theatre and the broadness of some of the jokes—he works for Paranoid Pictures, and WOP is a Chicago radio station—the mystery is played fairly straight. Wartime Southern California and the network radio background are nicely captured, and the prose, pace, and dialogue are strong.

Two important writers have been added to the Rue Morgue Press reprint list ($14.95 each): John Dickson Carr with two classic locked-room puzzles from his peak year of 1938, *The Crooked Hinge* and *The Judas Window*, the latter written as Carter Dickson; and Colin Watson with the 1958 debut of his comic Flaxborough series, *Coffin, Scarcely Used*. As usual, publishers Tom and Enid Schantz provide informative introductions.

Shepard Rifkin's excellent 1970 civil rights-era novel, *The Murderer Vine* ($6.99) is the latest in Hard Case Crime's distinguished reprint line. . . . In honor of Ian Fleming's centenary, Penguin has all 14 James Bond books (twelve novels and two collections) in print in handsome trade paper editions. A rereading of the 1959 classic *Goldfinger* ($14) shows how good 007's creator could be at his best. ●

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An Object of Scandal and Concern

by Robert Barnard

Well, this was one situation I hadn't expected to find myself in! I had, in fact, been to church before. It was the funeral of Svein's sister in Molde. He'd left me outside, but it was summer, and hot, and the church door had been left open. I walked into the lovely shade, lay down beside Svein in the aisle, and watched him while he tried to cope with the Lutheran church service, not knowing any of the hymns and struggling with any observance more challenging than reciting the Lord's Prayer. He had not seen his sister for seventeen years, and it was a lot longer since he'd been to a service.

The latest book from CWA Cartier Diamond Dagger recipient Robert Barnard is a twisty stand-alone suspense novel entitled *Last Post* (Scribner, May 2008), in which a woman investigates hidden circumstances in her deceased mother's life. Mr. Barnard is also a master short-story writer and we have several more of his tales to offer readers in coming months. †

This was quite a lot different.

"O Dog, our help in ages past,
Our hope for years to come . . ."

They seemed to have the right ideas. Though how long I, a dog, in my prime at nine, was going to be Svein's best hope in years to come when he, at sixty-four, was coasting blithely to senility remained in doubt. I was open to offers.

I was at the monthly service of the English community in Bergen—and of course the English have the right idea when it comes to dogs. The oldest members of the community are mostly Shetland wives—women who married the Norwegians who sailed over to Scotland from occupied Norway and joined the British war effort. Later immigrants came also by marriage, or were academics, businessmen, or workers in the oil fields, though church atten-

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dance among the oil workers was exclusively Northern Irish or Scots, or so I was told. And here we were: a well-attended service because the bishop, who served the whole of Northern Europe, was attending: He was giving the sermon, while the local priest was taking the rest of the service.

The vicar was short, pudgy, and impressive only in the power of his voice. Retired from his English parish, he had for a time lived with his daughter in Bergen. This job was usually filled if possible by a retired clergyman who acted part-time and was rewarded meagrely. The bishop, on the other hand, was decidedly impressive: He could have presided at a royal wedding or a media-attended memorial service. Tall, lean, sleek, Kenneth Rose was the very image of an acceptable modern bishop. My dog's instinct told me that much of the effect he made was show.

"A thousand ages in thy sight
Are but an evening gone."

Before long I was deciding that an evening was like a thousand ages, because the bishop's sermon did go on. I wasn't used to oratory on this scale, because Svein's verbal advances tend to be monosyllabic or confined to commonplaces and fatuous queries. But eventually the whole thing was over, we were out in the sunlight, and the priest and the bishop were shaking hands, the latter being friendly without being condescending, and making enquiries about absent members of the congregation.

"Just wait and watch, Loyd old boy," muttered Svein. "We're old friends of the bishop, remember."

It was lovely late summer sunshine and eventually everyone drove off home, the bishop said goodbye to Humbleby the vicar, and then, waving in their direction, he eventually came over to us.

"I've told him you're an old friend who is going to drive me to the airport," he said. "I hope I can be forgiven a white lie."

"If you can't be, then God help the rest of us," said Svein. The bishop smiled neutrally and allowed himself to be led to the car. The moment the pair were strapped into their seats the bishop began his spiel. He had paid, and did pay, no attention to me, reminding me of an English dog who once told me, feelingly, that the English were not a nation of dog-lovers as their reputation has it, but a nation of dog-neglecters. Anyway the bish certainly had his material under closer control than he had had his sermon.

"Let me get straight down to business," he began, "since we haven't got long. Mr. Humbleby, the priest here, came to Bergen to live about three years ago, together with his daughter Ellen."

"Was she at the service tonight?" Svein asked.

"No-o-o," said the bishop meaningfully. He went on: "He was made priest for Bergen and the Western Coast a year ago, when the previous man died. We mostly have retired English priests in these

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jobs, which are to look after Anglicans and English speakers in general, and in this case we had one to hand. It's always worked well till now."

"But not this appointment?" asked Svein.

The bishop took a deep breath.

"I am entering into this matter most reluctantly. I have no personal knowledge of it, you understand. I am acting after complaints—no, perhaps I should just say approaches—from members of his congregation, which means Anglicans from the West Coast here in Norway—from Stavanger to Trondheim."

"Big area," said Svein. "Complaints from all over, then."

"I would prefer to say approaches from several individuals. When the Reverend Humbleby came here he was a widower—looked after, as I said, by his daughter. She, not surprisingly, has been wooed and won by a young Norwegian. She is a pretty girl, and by all accounts he is an eligible man, but perhaps she has been eager to accept and get away because—because her father has married again."

Svein left a silence, as if to say that remarriage was not, in Norwegian eyes, either a crime or a misdemeanour. When he spoke, he said, "You seem to find the daughter's marriage perfectly natural and understandable but the father's marriage somehow . . . deplorable. Is Humbleby's wife Norwegian?"

"Norwegian? Oh, dear me, no. I don't imagine there would be any . . . approaches if she were. No, she is French, she says."

"But people doubt it?"

"She speaks it beautifully, but her complexion is such that people feel there is probably North African blood. But you mustn't get the impression this is a racial question."

"Funny—I was just beginning to get just that idea," said Svein, who was really handling this rather well, and made me suspect he had had a bad experience with a bishop as a boy.

"No, no. The question is about the lady's past. The rumour that is going round is that Chantal has been employed—I must speak frankly—in a brothel, or brothels, in the South of France."

"Ah," said Svein. "Unusual for a clergyman's wife. I'd have to admit I can't see a Norwegian congregation standing for it."

"I think not indeed. And in fact, many members of the congregations we get here are Norwegians: the children of one or other English parent, or the husbands and wives of Norwegians, or just people who prefer something a bit brighter than the standard Lutheran service of the state church here. No, really, I cannot see a Norwegian congregation standing for it, as you put it. Though of course there will always be one or two who mention Mary Magdalene."

"Mary M—. That wouldn't be the Virgin Mary, would it?"

"By no means."

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"Wait a sec. The woman taken in adultery!" said Svein, triumphantly.

"Popularly believed to be so. But we should not confuse adultery with prostitution. And we have no evidence Mary Magdalene went off and married a rabbi."

"All very interesting," said Svein, rubbing his hands in dirty-minded glee so that we swerved to avoid a red squirrel. "This will be a nice change for Loyd and me. We don't even get much divorce work these days, now everything is so amicable, and laid down by law. Now, I believe the lady was not in the congregation today."

"No. Very regrettable, but of course my schedule of visits is fixed months in advance. She was on holiday with her sister in Nice, so I've unfortunately missed seeing her. She'll be back on Tuesday. In the meanwhile I have a picture of her—a photo."

He handed it over. Before looking at it, Svein asked: "The question is, what do you want me to do?"

"I want you to go to the South of France and get evidence one way or the other."

"I have no French."

"All the French speak English these days. It sticks in their throat, but they do it. And you will have your photograph."

Svein looked at it.

"Very nice! Obviously a tremendous looker in her time. And still very easy on the eye."

The bishop coughed a disapproving but forgiving cough. We were approaching Bergen airport, and he gathered his things together.

"I regret greatly not seeing the lady—er, the vicar's wife. It presents a better face to the question if I have actually seen, or even talked to, the object of the . . . approaches to me. Nothing to be done about it. I leave the case to you, and I rely on you to do the job as speedily and as economically as such a case can be done."

"Of course, I shall need to get a pet's passport for my dog," said Svein. The bishop's eyebrows rose.

"Your dog? What use can a dog be in a case like this?"

"You don't know Loyd. And brothels in France, particularly Marseilles, are notoriously rough, lawless places."

"Really? I suppose that's possible. One hears about pimps and people like that. Well, I rely on you, and of course on Loyd. I trust you will be discreet. This is a matter full of dreadful possibilities for scandal, scoffing, and general unseemly hilarity. Absolute discretion must be the watchword."

Svein assured him that discretion always was our watchword, but the bish seemed to think he should be vouchsafed something special not given equally to the hoi polloi, and he went off towards the air terminal looking dubious, as if he had landed himself in uncharted waters and was fearful of finding himself in the maelstrom.

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Svein took his time. He had an old policeman's feeling (which I share) that a crime is a crime, and is something urgent, whereas something morally whiffy in the past is something that can be taken slowly, savoured. We had all the injections done on Monday, which I endured with truly canine stoicism, and on Wednesday we went on a visit to the Rev. Humbleby. An excuse for the visit took Svein some time to work out, but in the end he took a glove.

"I'm sorry to bother you," he said when the Rev. Humbleby opened the door, "but the bishop thought he must have picked this up by mistake when he had lunch here on Sunday. He found it in his pocket when he was going for the plane."

"I don't think this is one of—" began Humbleby, no doubt wondering why anyone should have gloves lying around in September when the worst that the Bergen climate throws at you is rain, followed by rain, followed by more rain. But he was interrupted by a charming voice.

"Ah—quel charmant chien! What a 'andsome boy. Is 'e a boy? 'E 'as so much 'air 'e is modesty personified."

I wagged my tail like crazy. It's something I've never been able to stop myself doing, where what I should show is an official lack of interest. Charming women, especially dusky, mature, and incredibly sexy women do not feature much in Svein's lifestyle, though they do sometimes in his official investigations.

"This is Loyd," he said. "He used to be my most trusted police dog."

"Oh, bring 'im in. I came back and found lots of cold meat left over from Sunday. Cold meat I habominate, and all leftovers. If the meal is good, there is no leftovers."

We were in the vicarage's sitting room, and Chantal bustled out into the kitchen and came back with a plate of slices of meat which I did justice to.

"You have been away?" asked Svein. "I didn't see you on Sunday."

"I 'ave been to Nice."

"That's nice," said Svein, not making a joke but just showing the poverty of his vocabulary. "I mustn't take up any more of your time. Loyd has managed to put away your beef very quickly."

"I must be getting away, too," came a voice from a far corner of the room. A thin man, short by Norwegian standards, stood up. He spoke perfect English. "We've done our business. Good to have you back with us, Mrs. Humbleby."

We all trooped to the door and made our farewells. The vicarage was a small but charming house in Fana, and we went out into the weak autumn sunshine. The man introduced himself as Stan Shawston, one of Humbleby's parishioners. As we walked towards our cars Svein made use of his new contact.

"Very charming woman, Mrs. Humbleby."

"Delightful. A real addition to the congregation. Numbers have

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gone up on Sundays, I can tell you!"

"Oh really? I heard there'd been a lot of talk."

"Did you? I suppose it got to the ear of the bishop, did it? He's a bit of a figure from the past. That's the sort who get to be bishops. The people like Humbleby are at the cutting edge: They have to move with the times or they lose their congregations."

"I see," said Svein. "There was one allegation that I must say would have caused a lot of mischief if it had concerned one of our pastor's wives."

"Oh, I think I know the one you mean. Nobody has taken much notice. To me it's probably just talk. One or two of our members have been merchant seamen. They go around the world, often half-stoned. It's probably a case of mistaken identity."

"I see. So the women in the congregation haven't been causing the trouble?"

"I see what you're getting at. No, they haven't been causing trouble. If this was happening twenty years ago, then maybe they would have kicked up a fuss. Made representations to the bish—that kind of thing. But nothing like that has happened this time. We're in the twenty-first century now. And as Christians we have to judge people on what they *are*, not what they have been in the past. Otherwise what does repentance mean? What is the point of grace? I tell you, I act as Humbleby's eyes and ears with the congregation, and everybody—women included—is delighted to have Chantal. She's such a lovely person."

So that was that. Pollyanna couldn't have put it better. That was a view of the congregation's opinion as authoritative as we were likely to get. But I could see that Svein was puzzled. Someone had approached the bishop—perhaps had assumed new and multiple identities to make it seem like a general unease. Who? The Rev Humbleby's daughter, perhaps. The bishop had implied that she did not welcome her new stepmother, and Chantal's remarks about leftovers from a meal Miss Humbleby had probably cooked suggested an incipient feud.

I won't dwell on the journey to Marseilles. It was my first flight, and it was out of the question to enjoy the experience, imprisoned in a portable cage in the luggage hold. I howled for the first time in years. I knew no one could hear me or do anything about it, but sometimes you just have to howl to give adequate expression to your feelings. When I was relieved from captivity in Marseilles I spent the first hour throwing reproachful looks at Svein, who eventually twigged what I was trying to say.

"It's rules and regulations, old boy," he said. "You know all about them, having been a police dog."

From that point on, things began to look up. We stayed at an unpretentious hotel that allowed dogs in the rooms and where the cooking was excellent. I wasn't taken with truffles, which struck

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me as the sort of thing I wouldn't mind digging up and playing with, but certainly not using as food. Otherwise the things that Svein brought up to my room from the restaurant were more than acceptable, particularly as right from the start Svein made one of his most sensible decisions: This was to begin his investigations of the brothel areas of the town at the top end of the range.

He based this decision on his perception that Mrs. Humbleby, if she had ever been involved in the trade, had to have been a class act. He got in to see a young policeman by flashing his old Bergen Police ID, and he got a list of the streets where the customers were of the highest standing: aristocrats, local politicians, big businessmen, and friends of Jacques Chirac. I got the impression that the policeman had all this info at his fingertips not through the call of duty, but through that of the flesh.

I will spare you the details of our activities. Svein hawked his picture around substantial houses, once-respectable family houses, and other places pretending to be elite hotels. Usually he left me outside, which for once I found entirely acceptable. *"Cherchez la chienne,"* the motto of the macho philosopher dog Hamsun in the 1960s, was the order of the day for me. Prostitutes often have delightful dogs, just as rich women do, to enhance their charms. Probably they find them much more devoted and faithful than the male humans they meet in the course of business. Anyway, I had the time of my life.

It was in the morning of the second day that Svein hit a bull's-eye. It was at a rather run-down establishment in the Avenue Victor Hugo, where the past-his-prime doorkeeper had plenty of time on his hands, morning customers being restricted to men on nights and merchant seamen with only a limited time on shore. He stood there, his arms folded in a tough pose, at his feet a sleeping bitch long past her smell-by date. I went outside in disgust, but Svein did his usual spiel about not being a policeman and not investigating a crime, and the man recognised the photograph at once.

"That's Mme. de Stael—Chantal was her real name. She was in the Hôtel de Nuit, the star attraction."

"How long ago was this?"

"Oh, until a year or two ago. Lovely person, though she knew her worth. I was a sturdy chap when she started. I could throw three or four troublemakers out single-handed. But I never scored with her, or even made the suggestion. She only took the class customers. Not that she was a snob. It was the fact that she knew her worth. She had the looks and she had the technique to give a man a good time, and she was the soul of discretion. School headmasters, MPs, civil servants from Brussels, priests, diplomats—they were all safe with her. She worked half the hours of the other girls but earned twice the money. When they gave me the push because

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they said I was past it she talked about all the girls going on strike, but everyone knew she was going to get married so nothing came of it."

"Who was she going to marry?"

"Oh, some priest or other with a funny name. I don't get these religions. France is supposed to be a secular state, but you wouldn't think so, the airs these priests give themselves."

"What nationality was he?"

"Oh, British. They're the worst. They're always worrying whether they should give a tip."

And that was all we got out of him. Svein tried at the Hôtel de Nuit further up the road but a tank-like doorman threatened to throw him off a pier and we both retreated in confusion.

"We've got what we wanted, Loyd old son," he said. He even decided not to fly home, but to take the train to Hamburg and then the boat. I don't think this was for my comfort but because airline meals were below even his standards of culinary acceptability. We had an excellent trip, I made my contentment known, and as soon as we were home to our flat in Minde, Svein took me out to renew acquaintanceship with the smells and the leavings of my friends and enemies in that suburb.

My mind, though, was on other things.

I don't know about you, but I always think reading, writing, and even talking are much overrated by our two-footed friends. Most of them use talking as an alternative to actually experiencing. I didn't need much in the way of conversation with *les chiennes de Marseilles*. Still, as we walked along in the rain of Bergen past gardens soaked to an autumnal dinginess, past the last falling roses on their second flowering, I wondered how to communicate my unease to Svein. I was afraid he would just pass on our discoveries to the bishop, send in his bill, and leave it at that. But how to communicate what needed to be done? So often it became nothing more than a game of "I spy with my little eye," and this is what happened. Because in the end all I could think of to do was to look at a flower bush, look at Svein meaningfully, and bark.

"What's up, Loyd? Nothing's wrong here."

So we'd walk along a bit further till we came to another bush, and I'd do the stop, the meaningful look, and the loaded bark all over again. Finally Svein banged his forehead.

"I've got it. You're right, Loyd. I must do a bit more work on that one."

And it happened that when we got back to the flat and really began to settle back in Svein found on his answer machine a message from Chantal Humbleby: "I think we should arrange a meeting. Will you ring me?" Svein stayed up surfing the Internet, and in the morning he had his breakfast with a distinct air of self-satisfaction.

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Svein made an appointment to meet Chantal at the vicarage the next day. She said that her husband was on a visit to Ålesund and Kristiansund, so she would be alone. Svein said he did not take this as a reversion to her old profession, and he was obviously relieved that it didn't. When we arrived that evening promptly at seven Chantal welcomed me ecstatically, Svein decorously, and she poured gin and tonics for them and put down a bowl of freshly boiled stewing steak for me. A woman who knew how to please men! I gobbled it down in thirty seconds flat and went back to the living room.

"So you see, Edwin was getting rather worried. 'E talked to Stan, who told 'im the drift of your conversation, 'e thought about the visit you made 'ere, the business of the glove, and 'e thought: We are being investigated. Everyone in Bergen, naturally, has heard of Loyd. So 'oo is paying? What is their interest in this? What are they trying to do to us?"

"I think I can answer that," said Svein. "They are trying to get rid of you."

"But why? We love it 'ere. Bergen is the most beautiful place in the world when it don't rain. I 'ave a lovely stepdaughter and we are good friends as long as she don't cook. Everyone 'as been very welcoming to me. So 'oo is doing this? . . . You 'ave been to France, 'ave you not?"

"Well, I—"

"I knew it! Someone 'ave complained about my past. They pretend to love me, but all the time they are stabbing me in the back. And you 'ave found out where I worked. So? Here we say I was PA to several remarkable men. Everyone know what is meant by that. Who has complained to this bishop?"

"Ah . . . You have never met the bishop, have you?"

"Not yet. I was away visiting my sister when 'e came 'ere."

"I suspect you will not meet him. There will be sudden illnesses, or pressing family business that prevent his usual routine visits."

"But why? Am I so disgusting to his refined tastes?"

"By no means. He will not come here because you have met him before."

Svein fished in his pocket and brought out a photograph of the bishop he had found in the files of *Bergens Tidende*. "This is Bishop Rose."

She took it eagerly.

"Ha! Pious Pete! The only man who got on his knees and begged forgiveness before rather than after. Like a sort of grace. 'For what we are about to receive.' 'E is a 'orrible 'ippocrite."

"Yes—I think that about sums him up. He was afraid you would recognise him and talk about his brothel visits."

"Oh, I'd recognise him all right. But I'd never talk about 'im. All the priests and clergymen wanted anonymity—I pronounce that

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right?—but Pete, 'e was a complete mystery. I only know 'is name because one of the sailors knew 'im."

"Yes. I've been looking him up on the Internet. He was pastor at the Seaman's Mission in Marseilles. He must have known many of your . . . customers."

" 'E always wear a scarf over 'is face, coming and leaving. This sailor only see 'is face because 'e trip down stairs—legs tired out—and 'is scarf fall down when 'e tries to save 'imself. Ha! Pious Pete! Where do you get your satisfaction now? Not from anyone as kind and discreet as Mme. de Stael."

"I'm not sure. Perhaps he has a 'good friend' in Oslo. Oh yes—a little more gin would be most welcome. Now what I propose to do is to ring him—he will appreciate there being no written evidence—and tell him what I found out in Marseilles, mention that he may have heard of the Hôtel de Nuit when he was at the Seaman's Mission, underline that I found no evidence of 'scandal and concern' in the congregation, emphasize that you are a woman of extreme discretion, and advise him strongly to do nothing further. It will be quite safe for him to visit Bergen. Then I will send him a very large bill."

"Punish 'im for 'is 'ippocrisy. Good! I will talk to Edwin, tell 'im there was a misunderstanding, say it is all solved now, and everything can go on as before."

"Excellent," said Svein, getting up. "Thank you very much for your hospitality. Most welcome. Loyd thanks you, too."

"Lovely to 'ave a dog in the 'ouse. I shall get a dog."

"So you should. I'd advise against a poodle. There is a stereotype—"

"I know. I know. Remember you are talking to a woman of the world."

"Quite, quite." Svein paused at the door. "There is one question, rather embarrassing, that I'd like—"

"Of course. Everyone wants to ask it. To you I can reply honestly. Why did I marry my overweight, rather dull English vicar? Because 'e was the best lover I ever 'ad. You cannot believe it? You'd better, as the Yanks say. I am a woman who always insists on the best." ●

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Storm Surge

by Meenakshi Gigi Durham

A professor of creative writing at the University of Iowa, Meenakshi Gigi Durham got her start as a fiction writer in our Department of First Stories in 2004. Her new tale for us is set in what (as a result of her long marriage to a New Orleans native) she calls her "adopted hometown." She uses the momentous events of Hurricane Katrina as a backdrop to her fictional murder. ¶

I saw Riley on TV the other day. I am sure it was Riley; there could be no mistaking that knobby head of slicked-down Snoop Dogg braids, the red plastic glasses, the wonky eye with the scar blazing from brow to cheekbone—a souvenir of the time his stepdad threw a steak knife at him when he was a toddler.

He was slouching between two respectable-looking white people, a man and a woman, and some cleft-chin TV announcer was saying something about how they had befriended him while they were Red Cross rescue workers in the Dome. How the two white people were going to adopt him. His name was not Riley anymore, it seemed. "Antoine," he said into the microphone. "Antoine Dupree. My family all drowned in the storm." His good eye twitched, the way it always does when he is lying. But the adults around him were beaming, hugging him around the shoulders, talking about his bravery and his sweetness.

I wanted to call to him, *Riley, it's me!*—knowing that I could not, knowing he could not hear me. Knowing full well what our rules were. Knowing that we were never supposed to see each other again, or even admit that our paths had ever crossed. *(Swear on your mama's life, Kiran? I swear, I swear.)* If ever I saw him in real life, he would look away, he would feign ignorance. Neither one of us could betray, with the slightest flicker of emotion, that we were linked in any way.

It was important for Riley not to know me, I reminded myself. It is important sometimes for deep bonds forged in childhood to remain masked, especially when the real reason for the bond is murder.

Riley and I entered the same orbit two weeks before that storm, *the* storm, hit New Orleans. It was not our choice; children's lives are inevitably governed by force of circumstance, and we were, at the

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time, in the same circumstances. Ordinarily, that could not have happened, for we inhabited different worlds, Riley raised in the slough of the St. Thomas project, I in the effete elegance of Uptown. But our similar situations gave rise to our unlikely convergence.

It was Sister Olivia who took us into her home—a "safe house," they had called it when they whispered the address to my mother, a shotgun cottage on Calhoun. All of this was bewildering and terrifying to me; I knew, of course, why we were going there, but I had not known it would happen. I was aware that my mother's life was in constant peril in our elegant Uptown villa, but not that my mother would ever actually leave my handsome, rich, and sadistic father.

Oddly, coming to this house, this "safe house," unhinged her. Until then she had been invincible, to my way of seeing. She had taken the blows and the invective stoically, unflinchingly, hiding her bruises and her pain from the world; doing this for me, I knew, though I also knew that I was never in any danger—I was flesh of his flesh, the fruit of his loins. She was his target, not I. It was she who had finally made the arrangements to leave, after weeks of whispered telephone conversations and furtive glances and silent tears. We had brought nothing with us, except the small images of Hindu gods that she now lined up on the battered dressing table in our bedroom, praying incessantly to them as the sun beat down on the streets outside. She abandoned me to Sister Olivia's care, submerging herself in her new isolation, in the solace of her babbled prayers.

She didn't know that Sister Olivia was in fact keeping her own vigil, at Riley's mother's Charity Hospital bedside. "I had to drag Ma here," said Riley. "He found out we were gonna leave, and he beat her till she like to died. But I knew where this was, and I got her here." He was tall for thirteen, but thin as a live-oak sapling; he looked at me expressionlessly from his seat in front of Sister Olivia's old computer.

"Are you playing games?" I asked timidly, approaching the computer.

"Nah," he said contemptuously, "not games," and he covered the screen with his body so I could not see.

I wondered later if my mother had even registered his presence, or whether Sister Olivia had ever thought of the potential perils of leaving a teenage boy alone in the house with a little girl. I know now, of course, that there was nothing to fear: Riley was not an ordinary, libidinous boy; Riley saw me only as an irritant, and later, as a not-very-useful accomplice. But he missed nothing; if I thought at first that he barely knew we were there, I discovered quickly that he had an intimate and detailed knowledge of us, that he tracked our every move with characteristic sensitivity.

"That's Sanskrit, isn't it?" he asked me once, as we sat in the kitchen eating untoasted Pop-Tarts from Sister Olivia's sparse pantry. "That language your mother chants in?"

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"I don't know," I admitted. "It's Indian. We're from India. Well, my parents are. I was born here."

"There's no such thing as Indian," he retorted with scorn. "The prayers are in Sanskrit." I found out later that he was right. He was always right.

"You're rich, too, ain't you?" he asked. "I can tell by your teeth. You have good teeth. What do your dad do?"

"He's a securities attorney," I said, parroting the phrase I had been taught without any conception of its meaning or implications.

Riley whistled between the gap in his large front teeth. "You was real rich, then," he said. "You all lived Uptown?"

I nodded, assailed with a pang of homesickness for my pale pink room, my canopied bed, my schoolmates in their pristine uniforms.

Riley watched me, his eyes glinting.

"You can't go back," he said. "Once you here, you can't go back."

At first it was unbearably lonely and dull in that house, without company or diversion. I spent hours lying on the moth-eaten sofa in the front room, watching the geckos chase bugs through the dust on the floor. Riley spent all his time at the computer: Sister Olivia had an Internet connection, though there was no telephone, no mailbox, no other links to the outside world.

"Can I play a game?" I asked him once, not moving from the sofa but craning my head so I could see him.

"What I do's more important than *games,*" he said. "No little girl games on this computer."

Hacker. I learned the word later, from Riley. He was smart about it; he could put extra money into his school lunch account; he could fix his friends' parking tickets. He did other stuff, too. He was a news junkie, but not like my father had been. Riley read everything, and he told me about the cool stuff: about shortages of chocolate-dipped ants in China, or house burglars who asked their victims for rides home, or proposals to put voting booths in bars in New Orleans. He told me about corrupt politicians and crazy socialites. But he never read about the crimes. "Too much bad stuff goin' on in this city," he said to me. "You don't need to know no more about that. Not after what we been through, you and me."

Occasionally Sister Olivia would return to check on us, to restock the pantry and the refrigerator, and to report on Riley's mother's progress. Not that she was making any.

"Her skull was fractured, Riley," she told him gently, her eyes luminous with sorrow. "We are not sure if she will live. She may have to go to Our Father in Heaven soon."

"I figured," said Riley. "He beat her head against the wall. She a small woman and he was drunk."

"He was always drunk," he told me later. "That man could drink like a skink." He paused. "You know what a skink is? One of them little lizards."

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Did skinks drink a lot? I wondered. But it didn't matter, it was just something from Riley's repository of trivia, just Riley's way of talking.

"I thought my dad would hurt my mom that bad, too," I confided by way of sympathy.

"I shoulda got her out in time," he replied, almost to himself. "I shoulda stood up to that bastard. He wasn't my real dad even. All she had in the world was me, and I didn't do nothing to help her." He turned to his computer, fingers tapping restlessly across the keyboard. "All I know how to do is this, and that didn't help her none."

Riley knew the storm was coming, maybe before anyone else in New Orleans did. He tracked it on the National Weather Service for a week before it came. "This is gonna be the big one, Kiran," he said. "This the one that's gonna break the levees."

"So then what?" I asked. "What if the levees break?"

"The city drowns," he said soberly. "You ever heard of Atlantis?"

I had seen a cartoon movie about a pretty, crystalline underworld kingdom populated by big-eyed humanoids. "Yes!" I responded excitedly.

"It was a lost city," said Riley. "The water covered it and it disappeared. New Orleans is gonna be Atlantis."

The idea thrilled me; I envisioned living underwater, like a mermaid. I didn't know what the storm would really bring. I couldn't fathom the death and destruction that would attend the wrath of the wind and the water. I couldn't imagine the screaming mayhem that Katrina would deliver. Instead, I rapturously pictured my beautiful city sinking whole into the ocean's depths. It was a lovely idea.

"The river levee ain't gonna break," said Riley. "They been workin' on that. We'll pretty much be okay Uptown." He pointed to the map on his screen. "Gentilly, that's goin' away. Jeff Parish is toast. Serve that racist pig Harry Lee right."

He squinted at the screen. "We'll be okay here on this block of Calhoun," he said. "But down here, where my dad be hidin', the water will come up."

He sat back in the rickety dining chair, his eyes half shut, so that I thought he was falling asleep at the screen.

"Huh," he said suddenly. "Huh. Bastard deserves to die."

I am not sure how long it took Riley to hatch the plot. But he timed it perfectly; I think he had calculated exactly when the storm would hit, and he knew—the way almost no one else seemed to—what would happen afterwards. "We got to get out on Sunday, Kiran," he said. "That's likely when she's gonna come, this Katrina 'cane. Your mom, can she drive?"

"Yes," I said with surprise. "But we don't have a car."

"My dad's got a car," he said. "It's a old junker but it goes. If we do this thing on Saturday, I can drive it back here. Then your mama got to get us out on Sunday."

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"If we do what thing?" I asked.

"I gotta take care of some business before we leave," he said. "You're gonna help me. You're small, but you're strong for your age, and I may need you. It's gonna take two of us. You ain't scared of blood or nothing, are you?"

"Blood?" I repeated. "Blood?"

"This ain't no time to be stupid, Kiran," he said tersely. "You gotta do what I say. Your dad got away with it, but I ain't gonna let mine."

His dad was in hiding, having disappeared after the near-fatal beating of Riley's mother; he knew the cops would want to talk to him, he knew it would be trouble worse than any he'd been in before. "But I found out he's with his cousin George down on Calhoun," said Riley. "Not six blocks from here. He don't know I'm here or he'd kill me, too. He's tried before. That's how come I got this scar. He threw a knife at my head when I was a baby."

"Did it hurt?" I asked.

"I don't recall," replied Riley. "Your brain can erase memories like that. If they're too bad, you forget them. But I reckon I won't forget a lot of it."

"I won't either," I said.

"We can change our lives," said Riley. "Things can get better from now on. Especially after the storm, we can, like, invent ourselves. Be new inventions. Somebodies new." Somebodies we didn't know yet: Antoine Dupree, involuntary orphan of the storm, and Kiran Kesavan, nine-year-old murderer.

The shack on Calhoun was almost invisible. Its peeling yellow paint, and the general grime and garbage of its surroundings, rendered it unremarkable in that part of New Orleans. No one noticed two grubby children picking their way along the sidewalk toward it. In our time at Sister Olivia's, Riley and I had showered only sporadically, combed our hair when we felt like it, and failed to do any laundry at all. But street urchins are common in that part of the world, and on that day—August 28, the Saturday before the storm, the day everyone in New Orleans was preoccupied with more important matters—we went unnoticed. I have only vague memories of it now. As Riley said, your brain can erase things, or perhaps just suppress them until they aren't as terrifying to recall.

The door of the shack was locked.

"Let's check the windows," said Riley. "You're smaller than me so you are gonna have to go in."

I felt a stab of fear, but there was no use arguing with Riley when his jaw was clenched with resolve, when he was driven by demons. A small window at the rear of the shack was partially open. The backyard was an overgrown mass of weeds that grew taller than our heads and swarmed with shrill insects.

"This is good," said Riley. "No one can see us get in. This is gonna

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work." That was the first time I had heard emotion in his voice: It rose with excitement and cracked on the word *work*. When he looked at me, his eyes were gleaming. "I'll give you a leg up," he said. "You go on through and then open the front door for me." He saw my face. "It's a shotgun," he said impatiently. "Like Sister Olivia's. You just go straight through from the back to the front. Just go. He's gotta be drunk out of his brains anyway. Just be quiet and try to hide."

I stepped on his linked fingers and thrust my head through the window, which opened into a filthy bathroom that smelled of soap and sewage. Wriggling through was painful, but I could hold on to the sink to ease my descent. Alone in the house, I trembled, but I knew that Riley would be furious if I didn't obey him. And I knew there was no other way out but to let Riley in.

Negotiating my way to the door was the most harrowing experience of my life. I have nightmares about it still. I tried to tread softly and lightly, but the floorboards were uneven and I stumbled across debris. As I made my way into the living room, I met the bloodshot gaze of Riley's father.

The events that followed are a blur to me. I froze in my tracks, but although his eyes were on me, he did not seem to make any sense of me. He was drunk, I realized; he was so drunk he did not know what he was seeing. Riley was right again. Riley was always right, would always be right. Gathering courage, I walked to the door and opened it to my friend.

To this day, I don't know where Riley got that wrench. Did it belong to Sister Olivia? Had he stolen it or found it in the debris outside the house? I had never seen one so big; it was thicker than Riley's bony arm, and I wondered how he could lift it as high as he did, how he could bring it down with such force on his father's head.

"I'm gonna *fracture* your *skull,*" he panted. "Fracture your skull. Now you know."

I had not known how much blood there would be, had not known that Riley's father would react, roaring, struggling against Riley, his bulk knocking the boy over so that for a moment it looked as though Riley and I would be the victims of this wretched plan of revenge. But Riley sprang up and his demons were suddenly in full power; he swung the wrench again and again, so that bits of bone and brain and blood went flying, covering him, splattering me. Long after his father lay on the floor, his head shattered and his body heavy in death, Riley kept swinging the wrench.

When at last he stopped, he was sobbing. The tears were streaming down his face and his thin chest was wracked with spasms. I wanted to put my arms around him. I did not. I stood silently watching him cry. I wanted to cry, too, but found I could not. Have not yet.

"Get me some clothes," he said at last, without looking at me. "I can't go out in these."

I found a pair of shorts and a T-shirt on a bed in the back and

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brought them to him. The shirt almost swallowed him. The shorts were huge but had a drawstring that kept them up. The shirt had a Saints logo on it. He was wearing a Saints shirt on TV when I saw him, but it was a different one—I could tell because it fit him. I wondered later if he had chosen it on purpose, if it meant something, if it was perhaps a secret code for me.

"The car's out by the curb," he said. "Let's go. We gotta lock the door behind us. My cousin George won't be back. He works the night shift and the storm's gonna hit before he can get here."

Riley was right. Riley was always right, would always be right.

My mother and I drove out of the city the next day, hours before the storm came. She did as Riley told her; she was too dazed in her own sorrow and confusion to argue. Riley packed water and food for us.

"What about you?" I asked. "Come with us. We can take you, there's room in the car."

"Best if I don't go," he said. "Just in case. I can't be in that car. I'll head over to the Dome, that's where you go if you ain't got no way out. I'll get over there before it hits."

We looked at each other, and then unexpectedly Riley leaned over and kissed me on the forehead.

"You a good kid, Kiran," he said. "And don't worry. Everything's good, everything's gonna be okay." He looked at me closely. "Your brain might erase this. But if it don't, and if it don't erase me, then you can't ever tell. You can't ever tell that you knew me, or what happened, or why we did it. You can't, Kiran. You know that, don't you?"

"I know," I said.

"Swear on your mama's life?"

"I swear, I swear."

We drove out of the city in the rain. As the car crawled toward Baton Rouge, my mother's mood lightened. She turned the radio on and we listened to the weather. She laughed for the first time I could remember in weeks.

"Looks like we're going to get away, Kiran," she said.

"Yes," I agreed. The storm would come that day. The water would rise over the levee, just as Riley had said it would. The storm surge would wash down Calhoun Street and pour into the shack where Riley's dad's body lay. It would cover him up and cleanse away the blood and the bone fragments, the globules of brain. And then the sun would beat down for weeks so that when they found him, blackened and bloated, there would be no telling who he had been or how he had died, which is just what Riley had known would happen. They would mark an X on the door, with a 1 in the left corner—the body count. There would be no record of the savagery of that death, no way for anyone to know what we had done. Riley was right.

Riley would always be right. ●

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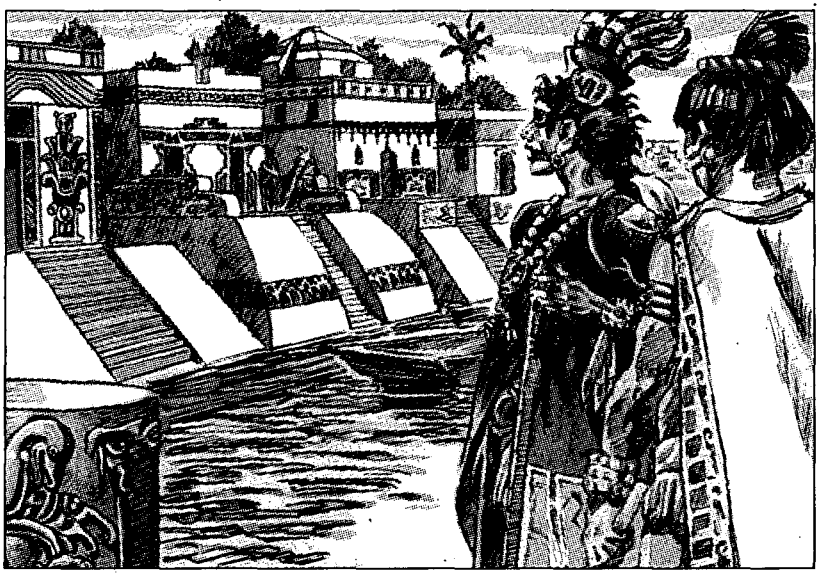

Art by Ron Bucalo

The Girl From the Pleasure House

by Simon Levack

The young priest named Cemiquiztli Yaotl was not in a good mood.

In the Aztec city of Mexico-Tenochtitlan, it was the day of the Feast of Maize and Beans. It was late in the spring, when the light winter rains were a memory and the life-renewing downpours of high summer were a dream. The rivers were sluggish and the roads were hard and dusty.

At no time of year were the ceremonies the priests undertook more important than now. The people of Mexico-Tenochtitlan depended on them to ensure the favour of the rain god; without that, there would be no rain and soon, no food. Nothing could be left to chance or human error; every detail of the rites must be observed, and any priest who was not entirely pure or who might make a mistake, however trivial, must be culled before the festival began. Nobody was exempt, not the youngest novice nor

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the most infirm old man.

To this end, Yaotl, a skinny young man, who had worn the black body paint and dark mantle of a priest from childhood, had spent five days being tested. He had been starved, immersed in the chilly lake that surrounded the city, had his body pierced with thorns, and been forced to enact pointless rituals. Hungry and exhausted as he was, he had spent each evening making little cairns of dough balls and tomatoes, knowing that if any rolled out of place, he would be punished, and that at this time even so trivial an error could see him expelled from the priesthood, beaten and half-drowned in the lake, and sent back to his family in disgrace.

Every year, Yaotl had passed the tests, sustained by the thought of what his family—in particular his elder brother, an arrogant young warrior named Mountain Lion—would say if he failed.

However, for Yaotl it was the sixth day—the day after the testing was over—that was the worst, because that was when the failures were dealt with. On the sixth day, the poor, dejected figures, the men trembling and with downcast eyes, the boys howling in terror, were pushed or dragged to the edge of the lake. Old and young alike were dumped into the cold water, jeered at, spat on, rolled in the mud, held under the surface until they choked, and finally, left to crawl away, miserable and shivering.

Custom and the will of the gods required him to join in, but Yaotl had never enjoyed it. It was too easy to see himself in the pathetic, slimy creatures whimpering on the shore.

"It's a harsh business," he murmured.

Beside him, his friend Telpoch said: "We all took the same test, Yaotl, and they had the same chance we had." He turned away from the lake, back towards the close-packed houses and smoking temples of the city. "Anyway, here come their families, so it's all over for them now."

They watched the little group approaching: anxious-looking matrons bearing rabbit's-fur blankets, stern fathers, truculent brothers and cousins.

One of the young men stopped in front of them.

"Yaotl? Is that you?"

Simon Levack's Aztec sleuth Yaotl, hero of this new story and several others for *EQMM*, also appears in four full-length novels: *Demon of the Air* (winner of the CWA Debut Dagger Award), *Shadow of the Lords*, *City of Spies*, and the latest, *Tribute of Death*. *PW* praised the series for making "comprehensible a society that seems at first glance alien" and for matching "impressive period research with tight plotting." †

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He was not much older than Yaotl, but already sported a warrior's lock of hair, and his orange cloak showed that he had taken two captives on the battlefield. For a skilled fighter, though, he seemed curiously unsure of himself.

He also looked strangely familiar. As recognition dawned, Yaotl's eyes widened, their whites gleaming against the black dye on his face.

"What are you doing here?"

"I, er, need a favour."

Telpoch said: "Who is this, Yaotl?"

"My brother, Mountain Lion." Yaotl spoke between clenched teeth. "I suppose he must have thought I'd failed the test and come here to gloat."

"Yaotl, you're not listening. . . ."

"Too right, I'm not!" He turned his back.

Telpoch stared at them both. "This warrior's your brother?"

"The one who used to beat me up, and put live snakes in my breechcloth, and practiced with his throwing-stick by using me as a target. Oh, yes, that's my brother!"

There was an outraged spluttering from behind him. "You gave as good as you got! What about the time you left a stolen cactus fruit on my sleeping mat and got me held over a fire of burning chiles?"

"Served you right! Come on, Telpoch, we've got work to do."

He took a few steps, but his friend placed a restraining hand on his arm. "Wait a moment. He said he needed a favour."

"Oh, forget it," Lion snapped. "I'm not asking that worm for anything. They can burn the top of my head off, I don't care. If he thinks I'm going to start crawling around his dirty feet . . ."

"Worms don't have feet!"

"Yaotl, don't be childish," his friend admonished him. "Lion, just tell us what you want."

"I need help tracking down a demon."

For everyone but the priests, the festival was rather fun.

The common folk threw parties, inviting their neighbours to feast on maize and bean porridge. They made pots and pots of the stuff, ensuring there was plenty to spare. At night, young warriors and the girls from the pleasure houses would dance from house to house to demand a share.

Mountain Lion had good reason to be pleased with himself. He was tall for an Aztec. His sinews were like ropes coiled around his limbs, the result of years of military training in the House of Youth. His hair and his orange cloak signified the tally of his captives. Lion was everything an Aztec warrior should be: handsome, serious-minded, lean of body, and hard as stone.

"Mother, will you stop fussing over me?" he pleaded.

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"I'm nearly done." The lady's voice was slightly muffled by the needle she held clamped between her lips as she bent over a small tear in the hem of the cloak. "If you wouldn't keep treading on this . . . There." She straightened up and stood back to admire her son's appearance. "You want to look your best, don't you? After all," she added slyly, "Flower Necklace might be there."

"What if she is?" Lion bristled.

"I thought you liked her?"

"I may have mentioned her name once. . . ."

"Just once?"

The young man heaved an exasperated sigh. "Can I go now? The others will be waiting!"

"If that paint's dry, yes." His mother touched one of the white circles around his eyes with her fingertip "Now, have you got your stave?"

"Yes." He picked up the maize stalk and shook it.

"And the jar?"

"No, I don't need one, I can share . . ."

"Flower Necklace's?"

"No, my friend Hummingbird Feather's! Goodnight, Mother!"

His cloak billowed behind him as he swept out of the courtyard. His mother watched him out of sight with an indulgent smile.

The procession wound its way along the city's highways and canal paths, a high-spirited little crowd of young men and girls out to enjoy themselves. The streets of the Aztec capital were normally silent after dark, when they belonged to creatures of the night, sorcerers and dangerous spirits. Tonight, though, was different, and the most superstitious of the young people could take comfort in their numbers and the light of their torches. Nobody was going to get much sleep tonight, and as they danced, whooped, and chanted their way through the streets, they left a trail of howling babies, yapping dogs, and cursing householders in their wake.

"When I do, when I do, give me a little of your porridge." Lion sang the traditional, meaningless words lustily. "If you don't give me some, I'll break a hole in your house!" The others joined in, swaying more or less in time with the tune, while his friend Hummingbird Feather's pine torch drew bright circles in the sky and set their shadows whirling.

The only thing that marred Lion's enjoyment was the way the girl at his side kept bumping into him, thrusting her hip against his as they danced.

By the time Lion had met up with his friends, Hummingbird Feather already had the torch in one hand, a girl on his free arm, and a broad grin. "You can carry the jar," he had said cheerfully, and Lion had no sooner picked it up by one handle than Flower

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Necklace had appeared, seemingly out of nowhere, to seize the other.

He could only glare at his friend and try to ignore his laughter. Watched enviously by his fellow warriors, he could hardly complain if one of the most desired girls from the pleasure house chose to attach herself to him.

When he had first seen Flower Necklace, just a few months ago, he had been as attracted to her as she seemed to be to him. But he had been just back from his first campaign, where at his very first battle he had taken two captives, both of them unaided, and he had been the talk of the city. His head whirling with success and sacred mushrooms, how could he resist the skilful attentions of a trained courtesan?

Unfortunately, it had not ended there, and soon there had been messages smuggled out of the pleasure house, his name called out in the street, and too many chance meetings. It had all been too much. The cochineal that stained her lips and teeth now seemed too red, the indigo dye in her hair too dark, the ochre on her skin too pale, and the figure under the thin cotton of her blouse too full.

Eventually his old mentor Fire Serpent, the Master of Young Men at the House of Youth where he had done his training, had taken him to one side and reminded him that pleasure girls were there for all successful warriors, not just one, and taking one as a concubine was against the law. At that point Lion had decided he ought to say something to Flower Necklace, but somehow the right words had never come.

He turned to her now, as they drew level with the next doorway and the threatening song rang out again.

"Um . . . Flower Necklace, there's something I've been meaning to . . ."

Before he could go on, however, the householder had appeared. He was a small, anxious-looking man with the tonsured hair of a labourer or a farmhand. He had a bowl full of watery gruel, although his hands were shaking so much that the stuff kept slopping out onto the earth floor of his house.

"Look, I don't want any trouble," he muttered. "Take this, it's all I've got."

"A likely story!" As Hummingbird Feather shouldered his way to the front of the small crowd, his torch waved dangerously close to the wooden doorposts. The householder's face, stained yellow by the flickering light, twisted in alarm.

"Look out! You'll set the place alight!"

Hummingbird Feather glanced at the bowl, which had spilled most of its contents by now. "You can do better than that for the brave warriors who defend your city, can't you?"

He aimed a kick at the wall beside him, driving his foot clean through the thin plaster. The girl on his arm gasped and giggled.

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"Oh, I'm sorry, how clumsy of me. Now look, you've got a hole in your house!"

The little man backed away from the door. He looked as though he was about to burst into tears.

"That's enough." Lion thrust Flower Necklace away from him and stepped forward, to stand just in front of Hummingbird Feather. He held on to the jar with one hand.

"What do you mean?" The young man with the torch looked bemused. "Look, these people have to show us respect . . ."

Lion's free hand moved to the knot in his cloak, shifting it a little on his right shoulder; by touching the orange cloth he reminded his friend who stood higher in the ranks of the warriors. "We asked him for a little of his porridge, Hummingbird Feather. That's what he's offered us. We'll take it. It's obviously all he's worth." He thrust the jar at the man in the house, who silently tipped the last few drops into it. "Now get back indoors and keep out of sight!" Lion advised him, before turning sharply on his heel and walking away.

The other young people stared wordlessly after him.

The procession had become more subdued by the time it reached the next house, the laughter, a little more forced. The crowd had split into two loose groups, one centred on Hummingbird Feather and his girl and the other on Lion and Flower Necklace. Flower Necklace kept cooing in Lion's ear about how noble he had been at that last house, which did nothing to improve his mood.

"When I do, when I do, give me a little of your porridge. If you don't give me some, I'll break a hole in your house!"

This was a more imposing dwelling than the one before, with a newly whitewashed stone wall and a wide doorway opening into a courtyard. A brisk fire threw an unsteady light over the idols lining the walls and the domed sweat bath in the corner. Several people squatted close to the fire, where they could enjoy its warmth and help themselves to warm porridge from a large pot standing over it on a tripod.

Lion noticed that the people in the courtyard were of varying ages. The youngest were children just young enough to be wearing breechcloths under their short cloaks, while the man he took for the head of the household was a tall, vigorous-looking man whose bearing, as he rose and strode unhurriedly to the doorway, might well have been that of a former warrior.

The householder hailed them courteously with the traditional greeting: "You have come far, you are weary. Please rest and have something to eat."

"That's more like it!" Hummingbird Feather approached the doorway. "A big improvement on that last place!"

"Now," the householder went on—and Lion noticed a slight catch in his voice, as though he was suddenly unsure of himself—"there's

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just one small problem . . ."

"Oh, no, not again." Lion groaned inwardly at the prospect of another confrontation.

The man's tone was apologetic. "You see, my wife dropped the ladle and broke it. Now she's gone indoors to look for a cup, but knowing her she'll have broken all those, too. Stupid woman!" The last two words came out with surprising force. "Take my advice, lads," he added, with a knowing look at Flower Necklace that made Lion wince. "Make sure you keep your wives in their place. Beat her on her wedding night and every night after that until she gets the message. It saves so much trouble in the long run!"

Lion avoided looking at the girl clinging to his arm. Glancing over the householder's shoulder, he saw a small, stooped figure in a skirt and blouse emerge from indoors, carrying what looked like a cup. She shuffled towards the fire. None of the people seated around it moved, but she stepped diffidently between them before bending over the pot to dip the cup in it.

Lion gave a warning cough as she came over to the entrance, but nobody took any notice.

"Once they start answering you back, you know you're in trouble," the man went on. "And then you find things aren't getting done. The household gods get dusty, the courtyard's not swept, the turkeys aren't fed, and they start breaking things, and the food's not cooked properly—I have trouble keeping the stuff she prepares down sometimes!"

Lion was not sure whether "they" meant wives or turkeys, although in the householder's view there did not seem to be much difference; but Hummingbird Feather seemed impressed. "Not to worry, sir. It sounds as if you have enough troubles, and we wouldn't want to bother you. We'll have our fill of porridge tonight anyway." He turned away with an abrupt air of decision that defied anyone else to stay and insist on receiving their gift.

The small woman had reached the doorway. "Husband," she whispered, "I found a cup."

"About time, too." He did not look at her but stretched out a hand to take it.

It never reached his lips, however.

Flower Necklace had been casting venomous glances at Hummingbird Feather's back. Before Lion knew what she was doing, she suddenly detached herself from his side, stepped forward, snatched the cup from the householder's hands, and tossed off the contents in one gulp. Then she pressed it back between the astonished man's limp fingers, before turning and flashing a triumphant smile at her friends.

"There! We've got what we came for here, too!" she cried.

"What did you do that for?"

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The singing and dancing were over. There was little to do but drift aimlessly from one house to the next, and the rest had gone on ahead, leaving Lion and Flower Necklace alone.

"I wanted to show up Hummingbird Feather and that beast back there!" The girl tossed her head, letting her long, loose hair fly about her neck. "And besides," she added, touching his arm, "I thought you'd be pleased."

"I'll be pleased when the sun rises and we can stop playing this silly game," Lion said morosely. Hummingbird Feather had taken his torch around a corner and its light was just a slight lifting of the gloom at the end of the street. Lion was beginning to feel the night and its attendant terrors closing in on him. All Aztecs were superstitious, and brave warriors were usually among the worst.

She lowered her voice. "Well, there are other games we can play, if you like."

The young man put his hand to his forehead. He took a deep breath. "Look, Flower Necklace . . ."

He never finished what he was going to say, however, as that was the moment when all his fears were realised.

If the attack had come along the street, Lion might have been able to meet it. He was used to seeing an enemy rushing at him, sword or spear upraised, mouth wide open in a scream of murderous rage. At the sound of pounding feet on the hard earth behind him, he might have done what he afterwards told himself he should have done: whirled around, seizing the only weapons he had to hand—the maize stalk and the porridge jar—and thrown himself between Flower Necklace and the threat, his own war cry bursting from his lips.

But neither his training nor his experience had prepared him to meet an assailant that dropped on him from the sky.

The first either Lion or Flower Necklace knew of the assault was an inhuman shriek that made them both leap up in fright. For a moment Lion stood, bewildered, head snapping back and forth as he tried to place the sound. It came again, from very close, and then Flower Necklace screamed in turn.

"Lion! Look up!"

Half the sky was hidden by the wall of the house they stood next to. Looming out over the other half, clearly discernible against the stars, was a shape that may have been human.

The scream came again: a quivering, inarticulate, piercing yell. It had not come from a man's throat. Only a woman or a demon could have made a sound like that.

The jar fell and shattered. Lion saw the shape above him move, and then he lost his head. Forgetting Flower Necklace and his warrior's dignity, he threw his maize stave aside and fled.

The torchlight had vanished by now, but he ran blindly towards the corner where he had last seen it. When he got there, he skidded

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to a halt so hard he scraped skin from his bare heel, and stared wildly into the darkness ahead of him. There was still no sign of the rest of the party, however.

"Hummingbird Feather! Wait!"

The cry came again. It was a little farther off now, but Lion had had more than he could take. He set off running again, and did not stop until his breath failed him and he crumpled in exhaustion.

It was not until the following afternoon that the shamefaced young warrior finally made his way home. His mother and father watched him in silence as he limped through the doorway into their courtyard. He said nothing, only wanting to crawl indoors onto his sleeping mat and forget everything that had happened in the night. However, he could not, because between him and the doorway stood Fire Serpent, the Master of Young Men. His arms were folded beneath the black-and-ochre mantle of a veteran warrior. As he eyed Lion's torn, filthy clothes and drawn features, his expression was grim.

He spoke two words softly. "Flower Necklace."

Lion's jaw dropped. "Flower Necklace?" he repeated hoarsely. "What about her?"

"Where is she?"

Lion stared at him. He looked over his shoulder at his parents, but they might as well have been a couple of statues. Turning back to Fire Serpent, he stammered: "I thought she'd run away too. I—I'm sorry. It was the shock. I thought it was a demon, or a sorcerer—coming at me from up there, in the dark—look, I'm a warrior, not . . . Oh." His eyes widened in horror. In a small voice he continued: "The demon got her?"

"What demon?" Fire Serpent demanded.

"Nobody's said anything about a demon, Mountain Lion," his father said.

"I should have stayed with her," Lion whispered.

"You have no business staying with her, lad," Fire Serpent retorted. "I've warned you before about trying to keep a pleasure girl to yourself. You're lucky I got to hear about this in time to try to talk some sense into you. You know what will happen to you both if the authorities find out what you've been up to? The warriors will expel you and singe the warrior lock off your head, and she'll be thrown out of the pleasure house with nothing but the clothes she stands up in."

Lion's mother added: "If you tell us where she is, son, then no harm's done, but you have to let her go back to the pleasure house. Please!"

The young man looked from one to the other of them in confusion. "But I haven't . . ."

Fire Serpent sighed. "I'm on your side, Lion. I was young once,

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after all! But this has to stop. I can cover for you until tonight, but if she's not back at the pleasure house by then, I'm afraid you're on your own!"

Hummingbird Feather woke up quickly, rolling off his sleeping mat and twisting his body so that Lion's second kick caught his hip instead of the soft flesh of his side.

"Get up!"

He was on his hands and knees by now, ready to spring to his feet. "What's going on? Lion? What are you doing?"

Lion lashed out again, but the other young man dodged and seized his ankle. Lion had anticipated the move, however. Throwing his whole weight onto his free foot, he lurched backwards, dragging Hummingbird Feather with him and leaving him sprawled facedown on the floor.

Lion leapt forward again, dropping onto the other young warrior's shoulders and pinning him to the ground. The breath whooshed out of his victim.

"What did you do with her, you bastard?"

Hummingbird Feather groaned. "What are you talking about?"

"You know what I'm talking about! Flower Necklace—where is she?"

"The last I saw of her, she was with you! Ow!" The last syllable was jerked from his lips as Lion grabbed a handful of his hair and yanked hard.

"Do you think I'm stupid? You wanted to get back at us for what happened at that first house, didn't you? And then the stupid girl grabbed that cup from the woman and made you look even smaller. So who was on the roof? That girl you were with? Did you put her up to it?"

"Roof? What roof? Have you gone mad—Lion, stop! You'll tear my scalp off!"

"And to think I was convinced I'd seen a sorcerer or a demon. You must have thought I was a simpleton!"

Hummingbird Feather talked fast. "You've got to believe me. We lost sight of you two just after we'd called at that second house. We'd all pretty much given up on the dance, so we just took the girls back to the pleasure house. Flower Necklace wasn't with us—the women there all thought she must be with you, they assumed the two of you had hidden yourselves away somewhere private. Just go there and ask anybody if you don't believe me! I don't know anything about demons and sorcerers!"

Lion relaxed his grip on the other man's hair. "But if I believe you . . ."

"Are you going to let me up?"

After a moment's reflection the young warrior released his friend. Hummingbird Feather eased himself into a squatting posi-

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tion and eyed Lion warily. "Why don't you tell me what happened, then?"

He pursed his lips as he listened to the story.

"If it really was a demon, then there's no telling what's happened to the girl, is there? She's probably been eaten. I don't suppose they'll even find a body!"

"Hummingbird Feather, please! Can't you think of anything? I've got until nightfall to find her, otherwise I'm a dead man—or I might as well be!"

A grin had spread over the other man's features as he witnessed Lion's discomfiture, but it faded as he saw the genuine terror on his face. "Well, if it's really a demon or a sorcerer that got her, why don't you get another sorcerer to help you find her? Or maybe a priest?"

Lion shivered, his fear of magic reasserting itself. "Where would I find one of those? Could I trust him? Hummingbird Feather—What is it? What have you thought of?" The last words came out in an eager rush as he caught the sudden lightening of his friend's expression.

"I've just remembered—your brother's a priest."

Lion turned pale.

"Oh, no. No, I am not asking Yaotl to do me a favour. I'd rather die!"

"Well?" Lion demanded anxiously. "Can you help?"

Yaotl had punctuated his brother's tale with a commentary of derisive snorts, short barks of laughter, and mocking grins. Nonetheless he had listened, if only so that he could enjoy Lion's misfortune to the full.

Telpoch looked at Yaotl. "Don't you think we ought to help? After all, if there is a demon loose in the city . . ."

"You don't go looking for demons, Telpoch—especially during the day. They find you at night, if you're very unlucky. Our job is to drive them away—that's why we have to wander in the hills at night with censers and fir branches to burn. Besides, we have duties. Talking of which . . ."

"No, we don't," Telpoch reminded him. "It's a fast day. We're not expected to do any work today, and anyway, we can say we were at the market buying paper vestments for the offering priests. Why don't we go and look at where your brother saw this demon? Aren't you even curious?"

"No!"

But Yaotl was lying. He looked sideways at his brother and found himself wondering what had really happened. As much as he had always loathed him, he had never seen him show fear before.

The two priests peered at the top of the wall. "I wonder how strong that roof is?" Telpoch said aloud.

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"Why, are demons heavy?"

"Who knows? I've never tried picking one up!"

Yaotl looked along the path towards where it vanished around the corner. "Hummingbird Feather was up ahead, then?"

"He was out of sight, yes."

"For how long?"

"It must have been awhile. I couldn't see the torch when I started running. Not even after I rounded the corner."

"Well, I don't suppose Hummingbird Feather had anything to do with this. It sounds like it would have required too much imagination for any warrior I've ever met! If he and his girlfriend had been close enough for her to get back here in time to give you your scare, then you'd have seen the torch."

"Maybe he doused the flame," Telpoch suggested.

"Doubt it. He'd have had to find his way home afterwards, and I can't see him waking some householder in the middle of the night and asking if he can rekindle it on his hearth. But we could always ask at the pleasure house if it was alight when they got back there."

Lion looked nervously at the lengthening shadows. "We haven't much time left."

"*You* haven't much time left, you mean!" Yaotl laughed unkindly. "Shall I come and fetch you home after they've finished with you in the warrior house?"

That was too much for Lion, who suddenly rounded on his brother, seizing him by the throat and shoving him hard against the wall. "Just remember this, you little creep," he snarled. "After they throw me out, the first thing I'm going to do is come looking for you, and don't think your black robes and your face paint will protect you!" He tightened his grip and shook the younger man so violently that flakes of soot fell off his skin onto the path.

As Yaotl gasped vainly for air, Telpoch tried to intervene. "Lion, this isn't helping! Yaotl, please—can't you try to think of something constructive?"

The only response at first was a choking sound. Eventually, however, Lion left off throttling his brother, who fell to rubbing his throat and groaning. Then he eyed the warrior balefully.

"You've got a funny way of persuading people to your point of view," he mumbled resentfully. "But I did think of something, as it happens." He pulled himself away from the wall and stepped warily past his brother.

"Where are you going?" Lion demanded.

"Back along your route last night. You'll have to show me where you went—and tell me exactly what happened at each house you called at."

The three of them stood by the entrance to the big house where Flower Necklace had snatched the cupful of porridge.

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Yaotl peeped into the courtyard, observing the cold ashes where the fire had been, the idols, the sweat bath. There was nobody about.

"Now, tell me again what happened, and don't leave anything out."

"I've told you twice already!"

"Do you want the girl found or not?"

Lion sighed before going over the story once more. His brother frowned in what the young warrior suspected was mock concentration, but the frown deepened noticeably when he repeated the householder's words.

"If Father came out with stuff like that about Mother, she'd make him pay for it!" Yaotl said.

"She would." It was one thing they could both agree on. "But that doesn't help me, does it?"

Suddenly a grin formed on his brother's darkly stained features. Lion watched in horror as it grew broader. His fists clenched. "This isn't funny, Yaotl, and if you still think it is . . ."

His brother chuckled. "Wrong on both counts, Brother—what our mother would do helps you a lot, and I've rarely known anything funnier! Wait here."

With that, he stepped into the courtyard.

He was gone some time.

To look at Flower Necklace now, Yaotl thought, it was hard to see why she was one of the most popular girls in Mexico-Tenochtitlan. Her face was drawn and her eyes were heavy with fatigue, and under what was left of her makeup, her skin was the colour of ash. Every so often she would suddenly turn and retch into a clay bowl that had been left beside her for the purpose.

The little woman, the householder's wife, fussed anxiously about her, alternately adjusting her blanket and casting anxious glances at the black-robed priest in her doorway.

"You say she's your sister?"

"Um, yes, that's right. They told me she hadn't come home so I thought I ought to come and look for her."

"She'll be all right, you know."

"I'm sure she will," he said neutrally. "It's just something she ate, I expect. We're very lucky you found her."

"Will you take her home now? Only my husband's still out in the fields, and he wasn't very happy about my taking her in. He didn't think I should go out there at night at all, but I had to get my cup back!"

"Quite."

"So, anyway, if she's not here when he returns, that would be just as well."

The young man smiled. "Yes, I think she ought to go home. Some

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members of my family will be very happy to see her."

He led the silent girl out of the house. At the gateway he paused while she rushed to the canal's edge to heave emptily into the water, all under the mute, astonished gaze of Lion and Telpoch.

Yaotl laughed. "Demons, indeed!"

Fortitude, Telpoch reflected, was one of the most important qualities of a priest, but he had rarely needed it so much as now. Listening to his friend boasting of his own cleverness would try any man's patience.

"I can't pretend I knew all along," Yaotl admitted, as they squatted in the priest house that night, enjoying the end of the fast and their first food since daybreak. "I'm not that clever!"

"No, really?" Telpoch spoke through a mouthful of leftover porridge.

"But you know what gave it away?"

"Do tell."

"Lion's mentioning my mother. There'd been all that stuff the householder said about his wife, and it occurred to me that the little woman would have found some way to get back at him. So she puts something in his food—that's why he couldn't stomach her cooking. She doesn't do it all the time, of course, and it's never anything deadly: just some emetic root, enough to make him thoroughly miserable.

"She didn't break the ladle by accident. I suppose they'd had a row and she thought it was time for his medicine. So she found an excuse to go indoors for a cup. She put some of the poison in it, and topped it up with porridge from the pot."

Telpoch swallowed the last of his food and yawned. "And then Flower Necklace snatched the cup out of his hands before he'd had a chance to taste it." He wanted to get this over with so that he could sleep.

"That's right. The poor woman would have been aghast. She knew the girl wouldn't be seriously ill, but all the same, she obviously thought she'd better look after her, at least until she stopped puking. But it wouldn't have done just to run after them, would it? She'd have to own up to what she'd been doing."

"So it was her on the roof."

"She's small enough. She scared my brother off, but I expect the girl was too frightened to run away before her stomach started churning." Yaotl laughed. "It's funny, but Lion didn't seem all that happy to be reunited with her, did he?"

Telpoch's only reply was a loud snore. ●

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What Happened to Mary?

by Bill Pronzini

When you live in a small town and something way out of the ordinary happens, it's bound to cause a pretty big fuss. Such as a woman everybody knows and some like and some don't disappearing all of a sudden, without any warning or explanation. Tongues wag and rumors start flying. Folks can't seem to talk about anything else.

That's what happened in my town last year. Ridgedale, population 1,400. Hundred-year-old buildings around a central square and bandstand, countryside all pine-covered hills, rolling meadows, and streams full of fat trout. Prettiest little place you'd ever want to see. Of course, I'm biased. I was born and raised and married here, and proud to say I've never traveled more than two hundred miles in any direction in the fifty-two years since.

Mary Dawes, the woman who disappeared, wasn't a native herself. She moved to Ridgedale from someplace upstate after divorcing a deadbeat husband. Just drifted in one day, liked the look of the town, got herself a waitress job at the Blue Moon Cafe and a cabin at the old converted auto court on the edge of town, and settled in. Good-looking woman in her thirties, full of jokes and fun, and none too shy when it came to liquor, men, and good times. She had more than her share of all three in the year or so she lived here, but I'm not one to sit in judgment of anybody's morals. Fact is, I own Luke's Tavern, Ridgedale's one and only watering hole.

At the recent Edgar Allan Poe Awards banquet in New York, Bill Pronzini was named a Grand Master of the Mystery Writers of America, that organization's most prestigious award. It's an honor richly deserved, for he is one of the most versatile, insightful, and prolific authors the genre has known—equally accomplished at character study or action scene, historical or contemporary settings. His novel *The Other Side of Silence* (Walker) is due out soon.

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Inherited it from my father, Luke Gebhardt, Senior, when he died twenty years ago.

Mary liked her fun, like I said, and rumor had it she didn't much care if the man she had it with was married or single. But she never openly chased married men and she wasn't all that promiscuous, even if some of the wives called her the town slut behind her back. One relationship at a time and not flagrant about it, if you know what I mean. She came into the tavern one or two nights a week and drank and laughed and played darts and pool with the other regulars, but I never once saw her leave with a man. She made her dates in private. And never gave me or anybody else any trouble.

One of the regulars gave her trouble, though, same as he gave trouble to a lot of other folks at one time or another. Tully Buford, the town bully. Big, ugly, with bad teeth and the disposition of a badger. Lived by himself in a run-down little farmhouse on the outskirts of town. Carpenter and woodworker by trade, picked up jobs often enough to get by because he was good at his work.

Thing about Tully, he was more or less tolerable when he was sober, but when he drank more than a few beers he turned loudmouthed mean. More than once I had to throw him out when he had a snootful. More than once the county sheriff's deputies had to arrest him for fighting and creating a public disturbance, too, but he never started any fights or did any damage in my place. If he had, I'd've eighty-sixed him permanently. Worse he ever did was devil people and throw his weight around, and as annoying as that was, I couldn't justify barring him from the premises for it.

Oh hell now, Luke Gebhardt, be honest. You were afraid if you did bar him, he'd come in anyway and start some real serious trouble.

He was capable of it. Town bully wasn't all he was. Vandal, too, or so most of us believed; Ridgedale had more than its share of that kind of mischief, all of it done on the sly at night so nobody could prove Tully was responsible. Animal abuse was another thing he was guilty of. Doc Dunaway saw him run down a stray dog with his pickup and swore it was deliberate, and there'd been some pet cats, a cow, and a goat shot that was likely his doing.

So it was easier and safer to just stay clear of him whenever possible and try to ignore him when it wasn't. The only one who felt and acted different was J.B. Hatfield, but I'll get to him in a minute.

Now and then Tully tried to date Mary Dawes. Like every other woman in Ridgedale, she wouldn't have anything to do with him. Just laughed and made some comical remark meant to sting and walked away. One night, though, he prodded her too long and hard and she slapped his face and told him if he didn't leave her alone, he'd have to go hunting a certain part of his anatomy in Jack Fisher's cornfield. Everybody had a good laugh over that and Tully went stomping out. That was two days before Mary disappeared.

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Disappeared into thin air, seemed like. One day she was there, big as life, and the next she was gone. The last time any of us saw her was when she left the tavern, alone, about eleven-thirty on a warm Thursday night in October.

She hadn't told anybody she was thinking of leaving Ridgedale, hadn't given notice at the Blue Moon. On Friday, Harry Duncan, the Blue Moon's owner, went out to her cabin at the old auto court. Her car was there but she wasn't. She hadn't checked out and none of the other residents had seen her leave or knew where she'd gone. That's when everybody started asking the same question.

What happened to Mary?

The first time I heard foul play suggested was on the second day after she went missing. J.B. Hatfield was the one who said it. Tully Buford was there, too, and so were old Doc Dunaway and Earl Pierce. Doc is a retired veterinarian, had to give up his profession when his arthritis got too bad; he's the quiet one of the bunch, likes to play chess with Cody Smith, the town barber, or just sit minding his own business. Earl owns Pierce's Auto Body, but he spends more time in my place than he does at his own; lazy is the word best describes him, and he'd be the first to admit it. J.B. works for Great Northwest Building Supply. Young fellow, husky, puts on a tough-guy act now and then but not in an offensive way. He's the only one who wasn't afraid to stand up to Tully Buford. Two of them were always sniping at each other. One time they went outside in the alley to settle an argument, but no blows were struck. Tully was the one who backed down, not that he'd ever admit it. J.B. got the worst of the face-off, though. It was his goat that was shot a week or so later.

The bar talk that evening was all about Mary Dawes, naturally, and J.B. said, "I wonder if somebody killed her."

"Now who'd do a crazy thing like that?" I said.

"Her ex-husband, maybe."

"Wasn't a bitter divorce. What reason would he have?"

"Hell, I don't know. But it sure is funny, her disappearing so sudden and her car still out there at the auto court."

Earl said, "Could be she went with a man one time too many."

"Picked the wrong one, you mean?" I said. "A stranger?"

"Somebody passing through and stopped in at the Blue Moon for a meal. Lot of crazies running around out there these days."

"Ain't that the truth?" J.B. said, and looked straight at Tully.

Tully didn't catch the look. He said to Doc, "Hey, Doc, you think Mary's been killed?"

"I have no opinion."

"You never have no opinion about nothing. Come on, now, you old fart. If she was killed, who you suppose done it?"

"There's no point in speculating."

"I asked you a question," Tully said, harsh. "I want an answer."

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Doc sighed and looked him square in the eye. He's mild-mannered, Doc is; usually he just ignored Tully. But Tully picked on him more than most and even a quiet old gent can get fed up. "All right, then," he said. "If she was murdered, the person responsible might be living right here in Ridgedale. Could even be the same coward who runs down stray dogs and shoots defenseless animals in the middle of the night."

It got quiet in there. Tully's face turned a slow, turkey-wattle red. He said, "You accusing me, Doc?"

"Did you hear me say your name?"

"You better not be accusing me. I told you before, I never run down that mutt on purpose. You go around accusing me of that and worse, you'll be damn sorry."

"What'll you do?" Doc asked. "Throw a rock through one of my windows? Pour sugar in my gas tank? Shoot some more cats in my neighborhood?"

Tully shouted, "I never done none of those things!" and grabbed Doc's shoulder and squeezed hard enough to make him yell.

"Leave him alone." That was J.B. He stood up and pulled Tully's hand off Doc's shoulder. "Doc's got bad arthritis—you know that, you damn fool."

"Who you calling a damn fool?"

"You, you damn fool."

Tully was up, too, by then and the two of them stood nose to nose, glaring. I said, "Take it outside, you want to fight," but it didn't come to blows between them this time, either. The glaring contest went on for about a minute. Then Tully said, "Ah, the hell with it, the hell with all of you," and went storming out.

Earl said as J.B. sat down again, "I was you, J.B., I'd lock up that new goat of yours and keep a sharp eye on your property from now on."

It was the next day, Saturday, the manager of the old auto court opened up Mary's cabin and found the bloodstains.

More than a few, the way we heard it, on the bed and on the bathroom floor. Long dried, so they must've been made the night she disappeared. The place was torn up some, too, from some kind of struggle. The county sheriff came out to investigate and didn't find anything to tell what had happened, but he considered the cabin a crime scene and kept right on investigating.

News of the bloodstains really stirred things up. It looked like murder, all right, and we'd never had a mystery killing in Ridgedale—no killing of any kind since one of the DiLucca sisters shot her unfaithful husband thirty-five years ago. Nobody who came into my place that night talked about anything else. Tully Buford wasn't among them, though; he never showed up.

"Blood all over the place," J.B. said. "Told you she'd been killed,

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didn't I?"

"Well, we still don't know it for sure," I said. "They haven't found her yet."

"Might never find her. Plenty of places to hide a body in all the wilderness around here."

"Won't make any difference if they do or don't," Earl said. "Whoever done it's long gone by now."

"Not the way I see it, he isn't."

"You think it's somebody lives here, J.B.?"

"I think it's Tully."

"Come on, now," I said. "What Doc said last night, he didn't mean it literally. Did you, Doc?"

He shrugged. "It's possible."

"I don't know. Tully's a bully and a bunch of other things, but a murderer?"

"Shot my goat, didn't he?" J.B. said. "Run over that stray dog on purpose, didn't he?"

"Big difference between animals and a woman."

"Mary might've turned him down once too often. Tully's got a hell of a temper when he's riled and drunk."

"I sure hope you're wrong."

"I hope I'm not," J.B. said.

Well, he wasn't. And we found it out a lot sooner than any of us expected.

Sunday morning, the sheriff arrested Tully Buford for the murder of Mary Dawes.

Cody Smith came into the tavern, all hot and bothered, and told us about it. He got the news from his brother-in-law, who works as a dispatcher in the county sheriff's office, and he couldn't wait to spread it around.

"Sheriff found Mary's dress and underclothes and purse in a box in under Tully's front porch. Soaked in blood, the lot."

I said, "The hell he did!"

"There was a bloody knife in there, too. Tully's knife and no mistake—his initials cut right into the handle."

"Told you!" J.B. said. "Didn't I tell you he did it?"

"How'd the sheriff come to find the evidence?" I asked. "What set him after Tully?"

"Phone call this morning," Cody said. "Man said he was driving past the auto court three nights ago, late, and saw Tully putting something big and heavy wrapped in a blanket in the back of his pickup. Decided he ought to report it when he heard about the bloodstains in Mary's cabin."

"Anonymous call?"

"Well, sure. Some folks, you know, they don't want to get themselves involved directly in a thing like this."

"But the sheriff took the call seriously?"

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"Sure he did. Figured at first it might be some crank, but then he got to thinking about the trouble he'd had with Tully and Tully's reputation and he decided he'd better have a talk with Tully. Got himself a search warrant before he went, and a good thing he did. Soon as he found the box and saw what was in it, he handcuffed Tully and hauled him off to jail."

"Tully admit that he done it?" Earl asked.

"No. Swore up and down he never went near Mary's cabin the night she disappeared, never saw the box or the bloody clothes."

"What about his knife?"

"Claimed somebody stole it out of his truck a couple of weeks ago."

"He'll never confess," J.B. said. "He never owned up to anything he done in his entire miserable life."

Doc said mildly, "A man's innocent until proven guilty."

"You standing up for Tully now, Doc?"

"No. Just stating a fact."

"Well, I don't see much doubt. He's guilty as sin."

"They haven't found Mary yet, have they?"

"Not yet," Cody said, "but a team of deputies has already started hunting on Tully's property. If they don't find her or what's left of her there, sheriff's gonna organize a search with cadaver dogs."

Well, they didn't find Mary on Tully's property and the search teams and cadaver dogs didn't find any trace of her in the surrounding countryside. They were out combing the hills and woods five days before they gave up. Sheriff's men did find one other piece of evidence against Tully, though. More bloodstains, small ones in the back of his pickup. All the blood was the same—type AB negative, Mary's type and not too common. They knew that on account of she'd given blood once during a drive at the county seat.

Meanwhile, Tully stayed locked in a cell hollering long and loud about how somebody was trying to frame him. According to Cody's brother-in-law, he threw out the names of just about everyone he knew, J.B. Hatfield's number one among them. But it was just a lot of noise that didn't get listened to. Nobody liked Tully worth a damn, but who'd hate him enough to frame him for murder?

None of us went up to the county jail to see him. None of us would have even if he hadn't been throwing accusations around, trying to lay the blame on somebody else. Plain fact was, life in Ridgedale was a lot more pleasant without Tully Buford around.

There was a lot of speculation about whether or not the county district attorney would prosecute him for first-degree murder. "Bet you he won't," Earl said. "Not without a whatyoucallit, corpus delicti." Doc Dunaway pointed out that corpus delicti meant "body of the crime," not an actual dead body, and that precedents had been established for first-degree homicide convictions in no-body cases. Even so, the D.A. was a politician first and a prosecutor sec-

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ond, and he didn't want to lose what in our small county was a high-profile trial. Most of us figured he'd play it safe. Try Tully on a lesser crime, like manslaughter. Like as not there was enough circumstantial evidence for him to get a conviction on that charge.

Turned out that's just what he did. The trial lasted about a week, with a parade of witnesses testifying against Tully's character and nobody testifying in his favor. The public defender didn't put up much of a defense, and Tully hurt himself with enough cussing and yelling in the courtroom to get himself restrained and gagged. The jury was out less than an hour before they brought in a guilty verdict. First-degree manslaughter, ten to fifteen years in state prison.

There wasn't a soul in Ridgedale didn't believe justice had been served.

Well, that was the end of it as far as I was concerned. Or it was until this morning, nearly a year after the trial ended. Now all of a sudden I've got a whole different slant on things.

It was Al Phillips gave it to me. Al is Soderholm Brewery's deliveryman on the route that includes Ridgedale; he stops in once a month to pick up empty kegs and drop off full ones. I went out to talk to him and lend a hand, as I usually do, and while we were unloading the fresh kegs he said, "I was up in the state capital last weekend. Took my wife to the outdoor jazz festival up there."

"How was it?" I asked.

"Oh, fine. But a funny thing happened afterward."

"What sort of funny thing?"

"Well, believe it or not, I think I saw Mary Dawes."

My first reaction was to laugh. "You must be kidding."

"No, sir," he said seriously. "Not a bit."

"Must've been some woman looks like Mary."

"Could be, but then she'd just about have to be her twin," Al said. "I stopped in at the Blue Moon for lunch enough times to know Mary Dawes when I see her."

"Al, she's been dead a year. You know that."

"All I know is what I saw last Sunday."

"You talk to this woman?"

"I tried to, but she hustled off into the crowd before I could."

"Did she see you?"

"I don't know. Might have."

"If she did, why would she avoid you like that?"

Al shrugged. "Your guess is as good as mine."

"Mary," I said. "Mary Dawes."

"Yes, sir. Mary Dawes."

I didn't believe it then. I'm not positive I do even now. But after Al left I couldn't get rid of the notion that Mary might still be alive. I was still chewing on it when Doc Dunaway came in. It was early afternoon then and there weren't any other customers. I drew him

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a pint of lager, his only tipple, and when I set the glass down in front of him, he said, "You've got a funny look, Luke. Something the matter?"

"Well, I don't know," I said, and I told him what Al had told me.

He drank some of his beer. "It couldn't have been Mary," he said. "A woman who looks like her, that's all."

"That's what I said. But Al sure sounded convinced. If he's right, then Tully's innocent like he claimed and somebody really did frame him—for a murder that never happened."

"Then how do you explain Mary's sudden disappearance? Where did the blood in her room come from, the blood on her clothes and Tully's knife and in the bed of Tully's pickup?"

"Well, I've been thinking about that. Suppose it was all part of a plan. Suppose whoever wanted to frame Tully paid her to disappear the way she did. Paid her enough so she wouldn't mind having herself cut and spilling some of her blood."

"Sounds pretty far-fetched to me."

"Not if whoever it was hated Tully enough."

"You don't mean J.B?"

"Well, he's the first one I thought of," I said. "Only J.B. doesn't have much money and it would've taken plenty to convince Mary. And he's not too smart, J.B. isn't. I just can't see him coming up with a plan like that."

"Who else could it be?"

"Somebody with both brains and money. Somebody who was sick and tired of Tully and his bullying and carousing and killing of defenseless animals—"

I stopped. Of a sudden, the back of my scalp started to crawl.

Doc? Doc Dunaway?

No, it couldn't be. But then I thought, yes it could. He was a vet for forty years and he loved animals and he was smart as a whip and he had a nice fat nest egg put away from the sale of his veterinary practice. Old and arthritic, sure, but a man didn't have to be young and hale to steal a knife out of an unlocked truck or help mess up a cabin and sprinkle some blood around or hide a box under a porch or make an anonymous telephone call. And a vet would know exactly how and where to make a surgical cut on a person's body that would bleed a lot without doing any real damage . . .

Doc sat watching me through his spectacles. His eyes have always been soft and kind of watery; now they seemed to have a hard shine on them, like polished agates.

Pretty soon he said in his quiet way, "Won't do to go around speculating, Luke. That's how ugly rumors get started and folks get hurt."

"Sure," I said, and my voice sounded funny. "Sure, that's right."

"Chances are it wasn't Mary Al Phillips saw. And even if it was,

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why, she might not be in the capital for long. Might decide to leave the state entirely this time, move back East somewhere."

"Why would she do that?"

"For the sake of argument, let's say your theory is correct. The person who conceived the plan might have kept in touch with her, mightn't he? Might offer her more money now to move away so far she'll never be seen again by anyone from this county. Then there'd be no proof she's alive. No proof at all."

I didn't say anything. My throat felt dry.

"Know what I'd do if I was you, Luke?"

"... What's that?"

"I wouldn't mention what Al Phillips told you to anybody else. I'd just forget about it. Tully Buford belongs where he's at, behind bars. Ridgedale is better off without him." Doc finished his beer, laid some money on the bartop, and eased himself off the stool in his slow, arthritic way. Then he said, "Well, Luke? Are you going to take my advice?"

"I don't know yet," I said.

"Better think on it long and hard before you do anything," he said, and shuffled out.

Think on it long and hard? I haven't done anything yet. And I still can't make up my mind.

I'm a law-abiding citizen; I always try to do the right thing, always want to see justice done. It's just not right for an innocent man to be sitting in prison for a crime that never happened in the first place—even a man like Tully Buford. My duty is to go to the sheriff and tell him what I suspect.

But what can he do? Nothing, that's what. Not without proof that Mary's alive and Tully was framed, and I don't have a shred to give him. Just a lot of unsubstantiated maybes and what-ifs.

And I could be mistaken about Doc Dunaway. I don't think I am, not after the conversation we had, but I could be. There wouldn't be any justice in smearing his good name without evidence, would there? I sure wouldn't want that on my conscience. Besides I've always liked Doc; he minds his own business, never bothers anybody, just wants to be left alone to live out the rest of his days in peace.

And there's no denying he was right about Tully. Tully might not be guilty of murder, but he's guilty of plenty of other crimes and he belongs in prison. You wouldn't get an argument about that from anybody in Ridgedale.

I don't know. I just don't know.

What would you do? ●

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Proof of Love

by Mick Herron

Some while ago—a few years before he died—Joe Silvermann chose a slow midweek morning to do some heavy shifting round the office; clear away the bits of orange peel and chewed pencil ends from under the filing cabinet. So he was wearing jeans and a Sticky Fingers T-shirt, and had built up a sweat, and hadn't shaved—was everything, in fact, that the well-dressed private detective shouldn't be when four million pounds came calling.

Or forty million, you wanted to get technical. If last year's Rich List could be trusted.

"Is this a bad time?"

Joe looked down at his grimy clothing. "I've been undercover. But I'm free right now."

He showed Russell Candy into the inner sanctum, which was more of a mess than when he'd started. Zoë was out. Joe had given up asking. When she was here, she was brain-deep in the computer, and when she wasn't she was somewhere else.

"I should have made an appointment."

"That's all right, Mr. Candy. For you, I have time."

Candy didn't look surprised that Joe knew who he was—Oxford didn't have so many residents with £40 million-plus that the local paper ignored—and even less so that Joe had time for him. It would be an attitude he was used to. He was fifty or thereabouts, not much older than Joe, and his face was deeply lined, as if each million had scored its passage there. Anyone else, or anyone else with his money, might have done something about his hair, too, which had a gone-tomorrow look, and was flecked with what was probably dandruff, though Joe wasn't a hair expert. His suit looked expensive, or at least fresh on, and his shoes were buffed to reflective glory.

Joe plucked a jar of instant from the shelf in the corner and waggled it invitingly. "I'm out of the real stuff," he apologised, and then

In a starred review of the Herron novel *Why We Die*, *PW* said, "Smart, dogged and never down for the count, Zoë [Boehm] is a fine addition to the ranks of female PIs." Indeed she is, and she's here this month in a case involving her P.I. husband Joe Silvermann. Mr. Herron's latest stand-alone thriller, *Reconstruction* (Soho 2008), also drew rave reviews from *PW* and the *New York Times*. ✝

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added, "Coffee," in case Russell Candy thought he meant heroin. "Take a seat? How can I help?"

Candy took the visitor's chair. "No coffee for me, thanks."

"Tea? Water?"

"Nothing. Thank you."

So Joe decided he didn't want coffee either, and sat behind his desk instead.

"But you need a detective," he said.

"Oxford Investigations," Candy said. "You're in the book."

"We have a growing reputation."

"And you're handy. I live just up the road."

Joe nodded, as if that had been part of his plan. "I've been here awhile. How can I help you, Mr. Candy? You have a problem?"

"It's not a problem as such. More like an errand."

"An errand."

"A delivery. A collection and a delivery."

"Like a courier service."

"Pretty much. But I'll pay your usual rates, don't worry about that."

Joe said, "Oh, I'm not worried, Mr. Candy. I'm sure you can afford my rates."

"Good."

"I'm just wondering why, if you need a courier service, you hire a private detective."

"Well," said Candy. "There's the thing."

Last time Joe had seen Russell Candy's picture in the paper he was getting married, though without the caption you'd have thought he'd been giving his daughter away. There were eight years between Joe himself and Zoë, or six once you'd rounded her up and rounded him down. You could adjust for decades in Candy's case, there'd still be a twenty-year gap. It was to do with money, of course, unless it was to do with whatever quality had allowed Candy to earn the money in the first place. But in the long run, it was to do with money. Joe wondered what it would be like, being Russell-Candy rich. So rich you not only didn't have to worry about your future, but could afford to stop regretting your past.

Anyway, a good slab of Candy's wealth sat on Joe's desk now, in a padded envelope. Which made Joe a lot richer than an hour ago, even if the money wasn't his.

Odd thing, he thought, digging scissors from a drawer. If Joe had been, whatever, a geography teacher or something, it wasn't likely a passing millionaire would have trusted him with—he sliced the envelope, spilling cash onto the desk—what looked like many thousands of pounds. But being a private detective put him in a world where such things happened. To be sure, Candy had told him not to open the envelope—it wasn't like he was pretending it didn't have money in it, but that had definitely been the instruction—only how

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Joe worked, he had a mantra: What would Marlowe do? Would Philip Marlowe have opened the envelope? Hell, yes. So that's what Joe had done, and here it all was: bundled twenties and bundled fifties; all in used notes, obviously. Nobody wanted clean money these days. It took him half an hour to count, and the number he came up with—or at least, the number more or less halfway between the different totals he reached—was £100,000. More than he'd ever seen in one place.

Joe sticky-taped the envelope together, put it in a carrier bag, and went home to get changed.

"You give him the envelope, he gives you a package. You bring the package to me." This is what Candy had said after giving Joe the envelope.

"All this seems straightforward."

"Good."

Candy had paused, and his hand went fishing in his jacket pocket, but came out empty. It found his other hand, and they settled for a nap in his lap. Ex-smoker, Joe guessed. Dipping for his cigarettes out of habit, then remembering he didn't carry them anymore.

Joe said, "But there is a problem."

"Really?"

"You'll know that blackmailers rarely take just one bite."

"I never said—"

"Mr. Candy, please. I give him an envelope, he gives me a package? It's a blackmail scenario. I'm not being censorious. I'm just wondering, why bring a third party into it? You're not able to do this exchange yourself?"

Rather pleased with himself, he leaned back in his chair and waited.

"I want to know who he is," Candy said.

"I see," said Joe, who thought he probably did.

"You're a detective, you should be able to . . . tail him. Find out where he lives, who he is."

"I can do that. But other things—say, threats—I don't do," Joe told him. It came out like an apology. Much of what Joe said did, which was a good reason for not doing threats. "Violence either," he added, perhaps unnecessarily.

"You won't need to. Once I know who's behind this, I can make sure it doesn't happen again. But there'll be no violence, Mr. Silvermann. I'm a businessman, not a gangster."

"This is good to know," Joe said.

When he wasn't undercover, or shifting furniture, Joe dressed conservatively: shirt and tie, usually; fawn chinos; a tweedy-type jacket he'd long been trying to upgrade from without success. A few years ago, when he and Zoë were still holidaying together, he'd snagged a bargain at an Italian street market: a leather jacket

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black and shiny as night, with a strap around the collar that buckled separately. Zoë had paid eleven times as much for something similar in a high-end shop. His had fallen apart the following spring, and she was still wearing hers. But despite all that, Joe had liked Italy, once he'd worked out that zebra crossings were designated accident spots, not safe places to cross.

So he was wearing shirt and tie, fawn chinos, and tweedy jacket when he got back to the office and found Zoë in residence: bent over a monitor, as usual. The information superhighway—wasn't that what people were saying? Joe had no complaints about the new technology, but was well aware of his own place in it: by the side of the road, his thumb in the air.

"Hey, Zoë," he said to his—technically—wife.

"I'm busy, Joe."

"With credit checks," he said helpfully.

"And reference checks."

"And reference checks."

"Which pay the bills."

"You don't get bored? Staring at the screen all day, not to mention what it's doing to your eyes?"

She didn't reply.

"Because it's not a secret, you can damage your health sitting at the computer all day long. Your posture suffers."

"You have a problem with my posture, Joe?"

"I'm only saying."

"You think I slouch? I don't stand straight enough?"

"You stand fine, Zoë. You always have. I'm just worried you don't get enough fresh air."

"So now I'm pale and wasted, right? You don't like my pasty complexion?"

"Can I get you a cup of coffee, Zoë?"

"We're out of coffee."

"I think there's some instant."

"What do you want, Joe? I'm busy."

"We've got a job."

"'We'?"

"A piece of proper detective work."

He was looking over her shoulder as he said this—at the screen on which it was so easy to go back and delete what had just been keyed—and thought: Push straight on, or beat a retreat? Push straight on.

Zoë said, "Prop—"

But Joe was way ahead of her: "Not *proper,* no, stupid word. 'Traditional' is what I meant to say. Yes, traditional. You know, out on the mean streets, dealing with actual flesh and blood and real live criminals. The kind of thing we always wanted to do, remember?"

"I remember the kind of thing you always wanted to do, Joe. Trouble is, it had nothing in common with real life." She pushed her chair from

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the desk, and Joe had to step aside smartish not to be run over. She looked up at him. "If you want this to be a success, you could do a little less wittering about mean streets, and a lot more studying what I do. Before you wind up on the wrong end of a credit check yourself."

"Blackmail," he said.

"It's not blackmail, it's common sense."

"No, blackmail. That's the job."

"Doing it or stopping it?"

Joe had to think about that. "Well, paying it, technically. Then making sure it doesn't happen again."

She pursed her lips.

"It'll be a lot more fun than credit checks," he unwisely added.

"Which provide eighty percent of our income."

"Yes, but—"

"And of which I do one hundred percent."

"It's not a competition, Zoë."

"If it was, I'd win."

She pushed herself back to her keyboard and began stabbing it viciously; possibly randomly. The screen underwent various transformations. It was like looking through fifteen windows at once.

Joe waited until the clock in the monitor's corner clicked onto the next minute, then said, "Zoë? I can't do it by myself."

He liked to think of this as his trump card.

Her fingers had stopped rattling, and she was using the mouse instead: clicking here, clicking there. But Joe was pretty sure she was slowing down. It was just a matter of time.

The clock in the corner turned over.

Zoë said, "I bloody hope he's paying well."

It was dark in South Parks. A lot of private detectives were former policemen, or had wanted to be policemen but had failed to make the grade, but Joe wasn't among them: Being a policeman would have meant working nights, and Joe didn't do so well in the dark. Which was one of the reasons he'd told Zoë he couldn't manage this on his own; another being, he wasn't sure he could manage this on his own. Tailing someone—an entry-level P.I. skill, if the books could be believed—was a lot harder than it looked. You couldn't count on the bad guy being unobservant. On the other hand, if you could, a lot of novels would be short stories.

He was hunkered down on a bench: that was the word. The jacket had given way to an overcoat, and Joe had his arms wrapped round him; less as a shield from the cold than to keep Candy's padded envelope secure—it was too big to fit his pocket. "Too much money to fit my pockets." It sounded like the opposite to a blues song. The bench was at the top of the long slope running down to St. Clement's, and there were trees behind him, and a brick toilet off to his left, and further in that direction the gate that was locked by

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now, so anyone turning up to collect the envelope would have to scramble over the railings, unless he was already hiding among the trees. Joe had considered doing that himself—the railings were high, and looked apt to cause horrible injury—but in the end was less worried about impaling himself than being found lurking by one of the groundsmen. "I'm a private detective," he'd have had to explain. "I'm a sex pervert," they'd have interpreted. From the bench, looking down towards the city, the streets were a blur of traffic and misty movement. A dog barked, too far off to be a worry.

"I meet him on the bench at midnight. I give him the envelope. He gives me the package."

This was what he'd said to Russell Candy.

"And then you find out where he goes. His car registration. An address. Something to know him by."

"This is personal, Mr. Candy."

"What do you mean?"

Joe had said: "It's not business. You're a rich man, forgive me. There's nothing wrong with being rich. Sometimes it means making enemies, but that's not what's happening here, is it?"

"You sound very sure of that."

Joe shrugged. "You're a rich man," he repeated. "For business-type problems, you'll have people. But you come to me."

Even Zoë would have admitted, this was Joe at his best. It helped that he looked like Judd Hirsch, who'd been in that old show *Taxi*. Not a dead ringer, but the same kind face. People often wanted to confide in him. He made friends the way other people make appointments. And sitting in that half-tidied office—the filing cabinet plonked mid floor like a half-arsed installation—Russell Candy, he could tell, was having what Zoë once called a Joe moment, which in this particular case meant forgetting that he was rich and that Joe was for hire. They were just two men sharing a trouble.

So Candy had told Joe about his wife's brief movie career.

Joe said, "The thing is, Mr. Candy, this is not like buying a manuscript. It's like buying a book. Somebody else can still buy it, too. There are bookshops all over." Deciding he'd taken the analogy as far as was useful, he added, "Video shops, too."

"It's eight years old. Seven, anyway. She used a false name, and wore a sparkly wig. It's not like anyone would recognise her. Not without being told." Candy paused. "What I'm buying is his silence. That's what he's selling."

Joe said, "But an actual movie, a film, if it's out there in distribution—"

Candy said, "There weren't many copies made. Between three and four hundred. A lot'll have gone abroad—Europe, the Far East—and besides, how many eight-year-old videos do you have? Most'll have worn out years ago. And this market . . . there's a lot of turnover."

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It would have cost him too much to say it, Joe thought. This market: porn. "He provided a lot of information, your blackmailer."

"You think I'm about to give him *this*"—this being the envelope—"without good reason? I wasn't born yesterday."

He said, "Mr. Candy. Forgive me, I don't wish to step on toes. But is your wife aware of what you're doing?"

"No."

"So you haven't, ah, verified—"

"I knew about the film, Mr. Silvermann. She told me before we were married."

"Oh."

"She didn't have to. I could have walked away, called the wedding off. You know how much bravery that must have taken?"

Joe said, "I couldn't begin to guess, Mr. Candy," and meant every word.

Candy leaned forward. "She was nineteen. And hurting for money. I can remember what that felt like."

"The money part, me too," Joe agreed. "Nineteen's a bit of a stretch."

"You've got to allow for gender differences," Candy said. "Girls growing up faster, I mean. Plus the fact that everybody gets older faster now anyway. So Faye's nineteen was probably more like your or my twenty-five. Anyway, that's not really the point. She wasn't a bad girl, is what I'm saying. It wasn't like this was a step on a road she was taking. It was an offer made at a time she really needed . . ."

"An offer?" Joe suggested.

"She saw it as an opportunity. You know, like it was going to get her into movies, make her a star. I don't blame her. And I'm not just saying that because I love her. I haven't always been rich. I know the things being poor can make you do."

Joe nodded wisely. "Half the world's woes," he said. "Did I say half? Ninety percent. Caused by not having what we need when we need it." Candy was still leaning forward, his hands splayed flat on Joe's desk. Joe reached out and patted one of them. "You're right, though, Mr. Candy. It was bravery itself, her confession."

"Oh, tell me about it. Tell me. I treasure the moment. It's how I know she loves me." He eyed Joe as if Joe were his favourite bartender. "I'm worth a lot, Mr. Silvermann."

"Please. Joe."

"I'm worth a lot, Joe. A hell of a lot. But take that away, I'm a catch? I've never been much in the looks department. Since meeting Faye I've been making an effort, but what you see is how far I've got. She tells me how to dress, and I still look like an accident in a charity shop. But you know and I know, I could have married years ago. It's just, I never met a woman I wanted who I could believe wanted me and not my money."

Because he paused, and because Joe was still there, Joe said, "I understand, Mr. Candy."

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"If Faye was just after my money, she'd never have told me about this."

"I understand."

Candy said, "He sent me a photocopy. Of the video cover. It's her. Sparkly wig, but it's her. He saw our wedding photo in the local paper. Says he recognised the blushing bride. She—Faye—she has a tattoo. Small, very tasteful." He tapped his left shoulder with his right hand. "It's there. It's there."

And then he'd started to cry.

So now it was nearly midnight, and here was Joe on a bench. Soon this blackmailer would turn up, and Joe would take the video and give him the envelope in return, making the nineteen-year-old Faye Candy's sole movie one of the priciest properties he'd ever heard of. Not that she'd been Faye Candy at the time, of course. And anyway, had used a false name. Well, you would, wouldn't you? If he, Joe Silvermann, ever made a dirty movie, he was pretty sure he'd do it cloaked in anonymity, even if he wasn't cloaked in anything else.

"He gives me the video, I give him the envelope," he murmured. Not that he was in danger of forgetting the procedure; he was just spooked by the dark, and the nearness of trees.

And then would come the tricky bit, which was finding out where the blackmailer went. A car registration. An address. *Something to know him by.*

He'd thought he was alert; ready for the slightest clue. A twig snapping, or a rustling of paper. But when someone arrived out of nowhere, and sat down hard next to him, Joe yelped.

"You Candy's man?"

That's what Joe thought he said. And in the split second that followed, he had a near-perfect vision of the fiasco about to be born: one in which Joe, mistaken for a local candyman, ended up holding a few grubby fivers, while this dopehead wandered off with what he expected was a bag of crack, but was in fact a beautiful fortune. The next moment, thankfully, blew that nightmare away.

"From Russell Candy, yeah?"

Joe said, "And you're the blackmailer."

As mentioned, it was dark. The faraway lights didn't do much to reveal the newcomer, beyond that he was male, about Joe's height—though slenderer—and fuzzily chinned, as if a beard were considering its options. Joe couldn't really tell what he was wearing. Jeans, probably. A jacket of some sort. His voice quavered, so he was possibly nervous. If there was an accent, Joe couldn't place it.

"Did you bring the money?"

"That's why I'm here," Joe said, without reaching for it.

"Don't spin this out, man. We just make the exchange, and go our ways."

"You could be anyone."

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"Didn't I just say Russell Candy? You think that's some sort of *cosmic coincidence*?"

Joe said, "Do you want to show me the merchandise?" He wasn't sure why he'd said that. Merchandise. "The film, I mean?" he amended.

The man—he was a young man, Joe realised; he had the fluidity of movement of younger men—rustled about in the folds of his jacket. Then he was handing Joe a videotape-shaped object, wrapped in a plastic carrier bag.

Joe put his hand to it, but the man didn't release his grip. "The money," he said.

"How do I know it's the right film?"

"You got a machine handy?"

Joe didn't have an answer for that, so did what he usually did at such moments: said nothing, and waited.

After a moment, the young man pulled the bag back, and rustled some more. Then a torch snapped on, one of those pencil-sized lights, and Joe—once temporary blindness passed—was looking at a video box: *Bedroom Stories* ran the title, over a picture of a glitter-wigged girl trying to look mean; topless, but with her arms folded over her breasts. What might have been a dead moth decorated one shoulder. Trudii Foxx, it read below the title: two *i*s, two *x*es. A false identity, like Russell Candy said. Though Faye Candy wasn't, when you came down to it, that bad a blue-movie name itself.

"Seen enough?" The young man turned the torch off as he spoke.

Joe said, "What guarantee do we have this is the end of it?"

"My word."

"Excuse me, but you're a blackmailer. Maybe your word is not so bankable. How do we know, a month down the line, you won't be back for more?"

"Because I won't have the movie, will I?"

Joe opened his mouth, then closed it again: It's not the movie, it's the knowledge it exists. *What we're buying is your silence.* But it was not his plan to outline any wiggles that this blackmailer hadn't discovered himself. So he said instead, "And how do we know you haven't made copies?"

"Do I look like a . . . technician?"

"I'm not sure what you're asking me."

"How would I copy a video? It's not like taping off the telly. You'd need a special machine to record a videotape."

"I think maybe you can do it with two video machines."

"Really?"

"I think so. With some kind of cable." Joe wasn't a technician either, but he was pretty sure this could be done. "You connect the two machines with the cable, then put a blank tape in one, and play the film in the other, and bish-bosh. Just like recording it off, as you say, the telly."

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Both men considered this for a while. Then the blackmailer said, "Would you have to actually be playing the film? While you recorded it?"

"That, I'm not sure about."

"Okay."

Joe tightened his grip on the parcel.

The blackmailer said, "So, anyway. The price."

"I have it here."

"I figured. You going to hand it over?"

Joe had to ask. "Are you proud of yourself?"

"I need the money, man."

"We all need money. We get jobs, we save up."

"Look. I saw a picture in the paper, this rich bloke getting married. I recognised her from a dirty film. It was an opportunity, and I don't get so many of those. All right?"

He remembered Candy saying something like that. *She saw it as an opportunity.* There was maybe a moral here, or some kind of mirror-imaging, that might repay thought later, but for the moment all he could do was fish the envelope out from beneath his coat and hand it over.

"Thanks, man."

"You don't have to thank me," Joe began, but he was alone by the second syllable.

That far-off dog barked again. After a while Joe got to his feet and went off to tackle the railings once more.

There were guidebooks available—etiquette for beginners, that sort of thing—but Joe doubted any of them covered this setup: your knock answered by the star of the porn film you were clutching in your spare hand. Faye Candy was sporting a lot more clothes than on the video's cover, and had shed the sparkly wig, but was, no question, the same girl. Eight years older, but you'd not have guessed it. If her husband's face wore the marks of four decades spent shinnying up the money tree, Faye's was clear and fresh, as if her greatest struggle to date had been finishing *Heidi*. Looked, in fact, like butter wouldn't melt, Joe thought, before pushing away an unsolicited memory of *Last Tango in Paris.*

This morning, Mrs. Candy was wearing black leggings that stopped three inches above her ankle and what looked like a man's shirt: doubtless her husband's. It was collarless and stripey. Blue on white. Unwigged, her dark hair dropped to shoulder length, and her skin, though white, looked prone to blooming pink at a moment's notice.

"I'm, er—"

"You're Joe?"

"Yes. Of course I am."

"Russell's expecting you. He's in his study."

The line should have thrilled him more—he'd never called on any-

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one who had a study. But he felt awkward in her presence, and suspected that the tape in his carrier bag glowed like phosphorus. When she led him down the hall, she moved with what Joe could only call grace, to which various adjectives jostled to attach themselves, *lithe* winning by a head. He felt like a heffalump, tromping in her wake. She was tall for a woman, and slim of build, though that shirt (he hadn't been able to help noticing) didn't do all it might to conceal her charms. "Slim of build" didn't cover the whole picture.

He hadn't watched the video. Would Philip Marlowe have watched it? The answer, true, got more flexible if you counted Elliott Gould's shop-soiled version in the Altman movie, but there were rules, so Joe hadn't watched the video. He'd left it on the table in the sitting room. Taking it into the bedroom would have been a tarnished act.

Come the morning he'd found Zoë in the kitchen, drinking coffee.

"I didn't hear you coming in."

"Joe, you wouldn't hear a brass band coming in."

It was true, he'd slept heavily. Actually, always did.

"So, last night—"

"Did I follow him?"

"Did you?"

"Did I get an address? A name?"

"You got his name?"

"Am I a detective?"

"What is this, the first to answer a question loses?"

"You're asking me?" Zoë said.

He'd had to laugh. When it came to finding ways of getting under his skin, Zoë had yet to run out of inspiration, but she could always make him laugh. Or whenever, he amended, she felt like it, she could make him laugh. He was usually glad they were married, and often wondered if they'd one day make it work.

"So . . ."

"You lose."

"And for losing, what do I get?"

She'd reached into a pocket and handed him a folded piece of paper: a name, address, phone number, car registration.

"This, this is genius."

"I followed him, Joe. It was no huge deal."

It hadn't even involved scaling those railings. She'd been waiting outside, in her car, all that time.

"And then you hunted him down on your Internet."

"It's not entirely my Internet," she said. "Joe? Did you really give him all that money?"

"You think I kept it?"

"He didn't stop to check. It could have been cut-up newspaper. You'd still have the video."

"He insisted," Joe said. "Candy, I mean. He insisted."

"I know he's rich. But that's plain dumb."

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"I think he saw it as a proof of love. To match his wife's."

"Like I say," Zoë said. "Plain dumb."

And now Joe was standing outside Russell Candy's study, the unwatched videotape tucked under his arm. Faye didn't come in with him; she just opened the door, said, "Darling? Your man for you," then smiled at Joe, waving him in and closing the door behind him. Stuff to do, Joe supposed; whatever stuff needed doing when you were married to forty million pounds. Perhaps it needed counting.

Russell Candy said, "Mr. Silvermann. I didn't hear the door."

"Your lady wife let me in. And it's Joe, remember?"

"You didn't—?"

Joe made a zipper motion, finger and thumb to his lips.

"Then, Joe. Come in. Sit down."

The room was what Joe'd have guessed a study to be: largely book-lined, with a lot of possibly walnut panelling. But it was the photos you noticed. These were all of Candy's wife: in her wedding dress, at a party, on the deck of a yacht. Only one showed her and Candy together: a studio shot; the groom looking hot and blistered under the lights; Faye radiant, as in all the others. As Joe looked, he realised Candy was staring at him. Or staring, rather, at the package under his arm. Joe handed it to him as he settled into a chair.

"This is—?"

"Yes."

"And did you—?"

"No."

Candy closed his eyes for a moment. When he opened them, he was still holding the package. Gingerly, as if it contained a bomb, he removed the videotape from the bag, closing his eyes again briefly as he registered its cover, then slid open a drawer and hid it from view. All this, Joe watched with compassion. None of it could have been easy.

After a moment or two, Candy said, "Thank you, Joe."

"It was my job. There's no need for thank-yous."

"You followed him?"

"I have his address," Joe said. "His name. A few other details."

"Who is he?"

"Mr. Candy, are you sure—"

"Like you say. Your job."

"McKenzie. He is a Mr. Neil McKenzie." Joe offered a piece of paper across the desk. "You know the name at all?"

Candy thought about it. Decided he didn't. Shook his head.

"No reason you should," Joe assured him. "He only knows you through your picture in the paper. And he recognised your wife, of course. But he made no copies of the film."

"He told you that?"

"I believed him. He didn't seem—he was not what you'd call a technician."

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"And you're a good judge of character?"

Joe shrugged modestly. "In my line of work, it's a bonus."

"So I won't be hearing from him again?"

"I wish I could make promises. But a blackmailer, he's more a jackal than a lion. And you've given him one good feed already."

"But now I know where he lives." Russell Candy's hand wrapped itself round Joe's slip of paper.

A good judge of character would recognise this as a Moment.

Joe said, "Mr. Candy. Russell. You don't mind?"

"It's fine."

"Russell. You will forgive me for asking. We are not friends exactly, of course not. You're paying for my services." It struck Joe that this wasn't the right line, and he changed tack. "But I feel responsibility. I gave you these details, McKenzie's particulars, so that if he tries his blackmail tricks once more, you can go to the police. This is not just the right thing, Mr. Candy. Russell. It is the only thing."

"He's a vile little—"

"He is vile, yes. Maybe not so little, but that's neither here nor there. And I'm not pretending he doesn't deserve punishment, but what I am saying, Russell, is that it would be a matter of grave regret. To take vengeance into your own hands, I mean."

"Trust me. I wouldn't regret it."

"Trust me, Russell. You might."

"Is this part of your service?" An edge entered Candy's tone: He was a rich, rich man, and Joe was offering him advice? "Am I paying extra for this part?"

But Joe was already showing his palms in surrender. "Please, I didn't mean to offend. It happens, sometimes, that I get carried away. My wife—"

"You're married?"

"She's called Zoë. She likes to remind me of a case, this was a few years ago, when I got arrested while looking for a missing dog. It's a long story and I won't worry you with it now, but what I'm saying is that sometimes I go further than I should. Such as giving you unnecessary warnings just now. It's over-involvement, Russell, that's all. I don't wish to see you in awkward situations."

Candy looked like he felt he was already in one. "I appreciate that, Mr. Silvermann. Joe. Appreciate it in all senses. And I don't plan to do anything—unto*ward*, anything untoward, with the information you've given me. It's security, that's all." He fetched his chequebook from a drawer: not the one he'd deposited the videotape in. "If the bastard returns, I'll be prepared. And yes, you're right, it'll be a matter for the police." He scribbled a cheque; didn't even appear to notice the sum he was scrawling. "And I don't have to ask you—"

"Discretion, of course, it's my middle name. Though not for banking purposes," he added. "Thank you," he said, taking the cheque.

He didn't see Faye Candy as Russell showed him out. Or anyone

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else: The multimillionaire did his own opening and waving away—there were those, no doubt, who'd regard this lack of staff as cheap, but Joe wasn't among them. He saw it, rather, as adding substance to the man's home life. Just him and lovely Faye, to protect whose reputation he'd secretly shelled out a hundred grand. Not to mention the substantial payment he'd made Joe himself. He'd called Faye's confession a proof of love, and his own behaviour showed this true of himself also: There was love in this house, Joe thought, as its door closed behind him. It would be a terrible shame if Mr. Candy endangered it by acting foolishly.

Surveillance sounded like a French word, though whether that meant the French invented snooping probably depended on who you asked. Either way, Joe was in no position to throw stones. For the past two hours, while the evening died, he'd been sitting in his car surveilling a closed post office; closed in the sense that it wasn't open, and closed also in the sense that it had shut down some while ago, and had boards over its windows. There'd been little to see, though an hour back—long enough that he could think on it nostalgically as a crazy, fun-packed moment—a woman had passed with a Chihuahua shivering on a lead. Joe liked to think he could empathise, but there were limits. That anyone could walk into a dog shop, point at a Chihuahua, and say, "I want that one," baffled him.

Darkness had painted the sky its favourite colour before anything happened to interest Joe. It was a car. The make escaped him: Cars didn't do much for Joe, which he conceded was a drawback in his chosen career, but he had the excuse right now that it was dark, and the car arrived lightless, and the streetlamps round this part of town—he was as far east as he could get and still claim to be in Oxford—weren't as maintained as they might be. But car schmar: Its details didn't matter. It cruised to a slow halt and its driver killed the engine. He got out, came round to the pavement, looked down at his hand, then back up at the deserted post office. Something about this scene, the slope of his shoulders broadcast, was wrong.

Joe nodded to himself twice, not without hope. He too emerged from his car. The sound of its door drew the other man's attention.

"You."

"It's me, yes."

"Your information—"

"Was not what it might have been. Russell, I'm sorry. There was no intention to deceive."

Russell Candy held out the piece of paper Joe had given him that morning. "Neil McKenzie? 24 Linden Road?"

"There was some intention to deceive," Joe amended. "But for the best of possible reasons."

"This place looks like it's been closed for years."

"And to whose benefit?" Joe asked. "A post office, it's a lodestone

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of the community. A lodestone."

"That's not really the point, is it, Silvermann?"

"Please, the surname. It's an unfriendly approach." Joe, standing close to Candy now, pointed at the empty building. "This, yes, was a ruse. But forgive me, your coat's lopsided." He moved surprisingly quickly; his hand dipping into Candy's pocket before the man could stop him. What it came out with was small, black, leather, heavy, and had a strap at one end.

"Oh, Russell," Joe said, more in sadness than reproach.

"That's not—"

Joe slipped the strap round his right hand; slapped the sap into his left. The noise echoed fleshily round the dark. "Not which? Not a toy? It certainly feels like it's made for harm." He magicked it inside his coat. "Russell, I owe you an apology, yes. There is no Neil McKenzie. Or there is, rather, but that's not what he's called." He nodded at the post office. "And that's not where he lives. I mean, you've noticed this already."

"You let him get away."

"No. I traced him." He gave a small shrug. "There was help. Internet-wise, you know?"

It remained dark, but Joe could tell there were internal struggles occurring: anger and relief. Russell Candy was a battleground. Joe was glad the leather sap was no longer within his reach.

"But you've decided not to tell me who he is."

"For the good of all concerned."

"For his good, sure." This with growing heat. "Not mine. What I want more than anything right now is—"

"More than love? More than marriage?"

"I have those already."

"But to keep them, that's the trick." Joe tapped a hand against his breast; the pocket into which he'd slipped the sap. "You think violence in one area does not seep into another? It's dark here, Russell, and certainly, you could wreak vengeance then slip off unaccosted." He thought about this, then said: "If McKenzie was here, I mean. And called McKenzie. But what I'm saying is, nobody walks unharmed from a beating. Not the victim. Not its perpetrator."

"You think I paid a hundred thousand for a lecture? I wanted his *name*."

"You paid a hundred thousand for a videotape, Russell. You paid me for a name. Generously, yes, but not a fortune."

"But—"

"You could hurt him, Russell, yes, hurt him badly. With your imposing physical presence. Plus your weapon. But he has knowledge, remember? About your lovely wife's past? And that's the one thing you can't take from him. Unless you planned more than a simple beating."

Candy began to speak, then changed his mind.

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"And in that case, Russell, believe me, there would be no winners. There would be a dead blackmailer, yes, but also a sick worm burrowing into you, and it would burrow and burrow until there was nothing left inside, Russell—nothing at all, no love, no satisfactions. You think your marriage would survive? And that, like I say, is if you walk away unaccosted. If you don't . . ." Joe shrugged. He was still close to Candy: all this information as confidential as it was urgent. And while he shrugged, Candy shrank a little, as if Joe's as-yet-unspoken conclusions were already hitting home. "If you don't, it comes to nothing. Everything you wanted concealed will be out in the light. Everything your wife confessed—her proof of love—just a cheap noise in the tabloids."

Russell Candy shivered.

"Listen." Joe briefly rested his hand on the man's shoulder. "Russell, listen. You want the truth? Go. This man, this blackmailer—yes, he's vicious, but who knows? Maybe he has needs, maybe this is the only escape he has. Okay, you don't care about his problems. But like I told you, he made no copies of the film. He'll take your money and disappear. His problems, well, now he has the resources to confront them. So Russell, go home to your lovely wife and put this behind you. It's over. The violence, your ugly weapon—Russell, trust me, you want no part of any of that. All the things you want, you already have."

He came to a halt, aware that to go further would be to risk repeating himself. For a few moments—which felt much longer—the two men stood on the dark silent street; one of them reaching out tentatively, his hand just falling short of plucking the other's sleeve.

At last Candy said, "I can't stand the idea of him getting away with it."

"It's my belief that nobody gets away with anything," Joe said, letting his hand drop back to his side. "Besides, I think what you mean is, you can't stand the idea of him knowing what he does."

"Yes. That too."

"But that fades to nothing, Russell, when you think of all he doesn't know. That your wife, your Faye, loves you enough to have risked everything—that she told you of this unfortunate film exactly when the information could have put your life together at risk. She trusted you. What is one little secret, lost to a stranger, compared to that?"

"If she hadn't told me, I'd never have believed the bastard," Candy said.

"Of course you wouldn't."

Candy shivered again, as if aware how nearly disaster had kissed him. "He'd have had to show me the damn movie."

Joe wanted to know, but didn't dare ask. Candy told him anyway.

"I destroyed it," he said flatly. "Burned it. Unwatched. I wish I could burn every copy."

"No one else will ever know. The coincidence, already, was huge.

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What were the chances, an eight-year-old film made for a . . . specialist audience, and this young man being local, and recognising the wedding picture in the paper?" Joe shook his head, wearied by how unnecessary it had all been. "But he's gone. It's over. And if it isn't—if he ever makes contact again—you let me know. And I will take care of it."

For the first time, Candy looked Joe directly in the eye. "You're sure? It's over?"

"I'm sure," Joe said firmly. Just the saying of it cemented it as fact. He was sure.

"Thank you, Joe."

"No need, no need." Here was another Joe moment, only this time it was Joe himself in the grip of it. The successful conclusion of a case: It demanded the grand gesture. Fishing inside his coat, he produced the envelope containing Candy's cheque.

"Here—I insist. You were right, perfectly right. You wanted his name, you paid me for his name. Which I did not provide. I did not earn my fee."

"You did your job," Candy said.

"But not what you asked. You wanted his name, his particulars. I thought it best you not have them. That was my decision. Not something you paid for."

"Joe—"

"Please—it would be a portrait of Madison. You follow the reference?"

Candy's bafflement glowed in the dark.

"*The Long Goodbye.* It's not important. But trust me, I cannot take your money." To prove it, Joe tore the envelope in half. Then quartered it. It would have been satisfying to cast the pieces into the night, but hardly sociable. He stuffed them into his pocket instead, then extended a hand. "Russell. Trust me. All this, you can put it behind you. Your life is what happens from now on. Go home to your Faye."

Candy took Joe's hand in both his own. "Thank you."

"Please. I'm just glad things worked out."

They walked to their separate cars in the dark. Candy's started the first time, and disappeared smoothly into the night. Joe's gave him trouble, and it was twenty minutes before he could leave.

There was a slow-burn conversion in process by which the city centre was being made more cosmopolitan, a metamorphosis most obvious in its cafes. The square behind the bus station boasted plenty, all with outside tables at which customers could read newspapers or chat with friends; an increasing number doing the latter via mobile phones. This was a passing fad, Joe had often mentioned in Zoë's hearing. Why cart round items of domestic equipment when we could be paying attention to people and nature and the happy accidents that make life worth living? Most people were

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best ignored, as far as Zoë was concerned, and nature wasn't at its best in an urban environment. As for happy accidents, she hadn't the faintest clue what Joe was on about.

The woman at this particular cafe had evidently not long finished a conversation: her chunky mobile sat beside a large cappuccino, which she raised to her lips as Zoë approached. Zoë put her espresso on the table. "Mind if I join you?"

"Oh—no, that's okay."

Though there were other, unoccupied tables nearby.

Zoë said, "I like your tattoo. A butterfly, yes?"

The woman looked at her.

"On your right shoulder? Or is it your left? I always get muddled when it's someone facing me."

"Is this a joke?"

"Oh, right. You're wearing a sweater." Zoë took a sip of her espresso. "But if I could see your shoulder, it'd be a butterfly, wouldn't it?"

Faye Candy put her cup down. "Do we know each other?"

"Not in the flesh. But I admire your work."

"I don't know what you're talking about."

"Fourteen seconds. Pretty good. I was expecting that line when I mentioned the tattoo."

"I think you should leave."

Zoë said, "Let me ask you something. Girl meets boy. They fall in love. Girl then meets man. Man falls in love with girl. Man very rich. What's girl do?"

"You're annoying me. I'm going to call for help."

"Honey, I'm telling a story. An audience is the first thing I want. So anyway, of course you marry him. He's rich, for God's sake. You give up, what, two years? Three? Then one smart lawyer later, you're on easy street for life."

"You're a lunatic."

"I watched the film."

Faye Candy opened her mouth. Closed it again.

"Joe left it out. It was a point of principle with him not to watch it." Zoë lit a cigarette. "It wasn't with me."

"Who are you?"

"Name's Zoë Boehm. And you want to know something? She does look a bit like you, the woman in the film. Even with the glittery wig and all that makeup. Not so much a stranger might notice, but a definite resemblance if you're looking for it. And there's the tattoo, of course. The clincher. But then, that's why you had yours done, isn't it?"

"You," Faye Candy said slowly, "interfering bitch."

"Thanks. Let me tell you what I think happened. You marry the millionaire, of course. Who turns down a once-in-a-lifetime chance like that? And you promise your boyfriend it won't be forever, that you'll be coming back to him, only richer. Did he believe you?"

"It's true!"

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"Maybe so. But he wanted a down payment, didn't he? Something to tide him over. And this is what the pair of you came up with. He didn't go looking for the film, did he? I mean, he'd already seen it, noted the resemblance. That's what gave him the idea."

"We'd watched it together," Faye said. "Nothing wrong with that."

"Sure."

"He's a college porter. You know how much that's worth, being a college porter?"

"I'm guessing not a lot."

"But he's got talent. He's a writer. He writes all sorts—poems, stories."

"Blackmail notes. Was it his idea you got the tattoo? To put the resemblance beyond doubt?"

"I'm admitting nothing."

"And then you faked the cover, of course. Must have been fun. Bit of a gamble, because the woman on the box clearly isn't the woman in the film, but—and here's the beauty of it—it doesn't matter, does it? The rich man doesn't need to see the film. All that matters is he knows that it exists. Because Russell Candy's hardly going to think you confessed to making a blue movie if you didn't. Who in her right mind would do that, and put her wedding to a rich man at risk?"

She tapped ash into her empty coffee cup. "It took pluck, I'll give you that. He could have walked away. But he didn't, so you're home free. Candy knows the blackmail's for real, because you've told him about the movie. No way is he going to shout for the cops, when all that'll do is make your dirty secret public. No, the confession was a touch of genius. Poor sap probably thinks it proves you love him."

Faye Candy said, "I'll be with him. One day."

It was clear she was talking about her beloved blackmailer.

Zoë ground her cigarette out. "The cheque Joe tore up was for a grand. You can make the replacement out to me. That's Zoë B-o-e-h-m. Don't worry, he'll get his share."

"Will you tell him?"

"Joe? I would if I thought he'd learn from it. But he's set in his ways."

"I meant Russell."

Zoë said, "I've got your boyfriend's name and address. Try another bite at the cherry and I'll blow you both out of the water. Otherwise, how you live your life's up to you. But you might want to get clear on the details in future."

"Meaning what?"

"You got the wrong arm. The woman in the film? Her tattoo's on her left shoulder. Yours is on your right."

She waited while Faye Candy wrote the cheque, then folded it and stowed it away inside her leather jacket. When she left, a chill breeze was just making itself felt, and cups were rattling in saucers around the square. But Zoë didn't look back, and was in the bank before the rain arrived. ●

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Art by Allen Davis

The Parson and the Highwayman

by Judith Cutler

William Scroggins, ragged, emaciated, balding, and bandy-legged, had very little in common with the heroic figure my sister Georgiana always wished would hold up the family coach. She regularly beguiled the long hours on the road from my father's country seat in Derbyshire to our London house by imagining just such an adventure.

The moonlight glinting on his pistols and his pearly teeth, his eyes a-twinkle through the slits in the mask, a romantic figure on a jet-black horse would appear before us, ready to seize the strong-box. One sight of dearest Georgiana, however, would smite his heart. Begging her to do him the honour of descending from the coach, he would fend off the heavily armed postilions and outriders, swing her across his saddle bow, and gallop off into the night.

Presumably at this point Georgiana's imagination transformed him from a thieving wretch into the handsome scion of one of the best families in the land, deprived by a cunning relative of his inher-

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itance but not of his sense of propriety. Now he was ready to win and woo her like a Hyde Park beau, whereupon she would help him regain his title.

So what Georgiana would have made of a real highwayman, stinking from his incarceration in Warwick Gaol, and so far from heroic as to be weeping as he knelt in chains at my feet, I do not know.

While the rest of the country gossiped over the declaration that poor King George was to be replaced by his son as Regent, I had come to offer poor William the consolations of the next world, since he had so little time left in this. Indeed, he was to be hanged within the hour. The prison chaplain had already read the service to all the condemned men, but since William was one of my parishioners, and had, moreover, actually attended a few services, I wished to be there to offer my support and friendship.

British author Judith Cutler is equally adept with both historical and contemporary settings. This time she's brought one of her series sleuths, Parson Tobias Campion, to life in a case from around 1810, involving the wrongful hanging of a poacher for armed robbery. Campion also takes the lead in Ms. Cutler's recent novel *The Keeper of Secrets* (Allison & Busby, January 2008). ✝

"I've done some bad things, Parson Campion," he said. "And no doubt I deserve to hang. I've poached all my life, stolen a sheep or two, scrumped apples, and I don't know what besides. Three times the justice has let me off transportation with a warning." I nodded —I knew the soft heart of that particular justice of the peace. "And three times I've let him down. And now I've come before the Assizes . . ." He wiped a tear with the back of his hand. "But I tell you straight, Parson, as God is my witness, I never took that there bauble. Here, let me lay my hand on that Good Book and swear it." He suited the deed to the word.

I believed him. But I said very sadly, "Alas, Lady Grenfell swore to the court that you did, William. And you admitted that you were after rabbits in the area when the coach was robbed—and at gunpoint, too."

He snorted. "Can you imagine me touting a pistol? How would I afford one of they things? Taking game's one thing, Parson, but sending a fellow being to his death, that's a different thing—in my book at least."

It was in mine, too.

"What would I do with a diamond necklace, tell me that! I couldn't eat it. I wouldn't know where to sell it. I wouldn't even have hidden it where no one'd find it! What would be the point? And tell me this, Parson, how could she have recognised me when I'm supposed to have had a scarf pulled over my face and hat over my eyes?"

I did not know. Taking his hand, I declared, "William, I will make

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one more appeal—"

He shook his head. "Nay, Parson. Even if you did, for sure they'd transport me. Look at me—do you see me lasting out the voyage to Australia? Well, I'd rather have a swift death and a burial in good English earth than a lingering one and a watery grave. That'd be the worst thing. . . . But if you could spare a corner of the churchyard in Moreton St. Jude's, I'd be mighty grateful. I should like to feel close to everyone I know. And—one last thing—swear you won't let those anatomists or whatever they're called take up my corpse. Else how can I be there for the Last Judgement?"

"No one but Dr. Hansard shall touch your body," I declared.

And with that he had to be satisfied. The bodies of felons were not permitted the dignity of being buried whole. Dr. Hansard, not just the kindly justice of the peace who had been merciful to William in the past but also the best doctor in the neighbourhood, was in fact the first to argue that advances in medical knowledge depended on surgeons dissecting their corpses. On this occasion, however, he had begged the courts for the right to examine William himself. Poor William had a growth Hansard was privately sure would soon have proved fatal, and he wished to examine its origins.

There was a jangle of keys and the gaoler was upon us. It was time for the solemn journey to the scaffold, accompanied by the far from solemn jeers of the crowd. As we walked, we said together the prayer Our Lord taught us, and he died on the words "Deliver us from evil."

I buried William the next day, bidding him farewell with a solemn knot of villagers who remembered his better days.

As the grave was filled, Dr. Hansard took my arm and led me off. "Time for a glass of Madeira, Tobias. Now, dear Maria tells me that our cook has made your favourite soup, and that if you do not come to sup with us at Langley Park she will be deeply offended."

"I fear I will not be good company."

"What are friends for, but to support you in times of solemn reflection? And I must tell you, Tobias, that poor William could not have survived long." As he propelled me towards his gig, he explained what had ailed him.

"All the same, Edmund," I protested, "a man is entitled to die in his bed, not have life snuffed out on someone's false accusation!"

"Such men as poor William do not have the luxury of a four-poster or a half-tester!" he snorted. "And he would have soon been in such pain that even my skills could not have prevented the most extreme suffering."

"So we are to thank Lady Grenfell for her part in what you see as an act of euthanasia?" I demanded bitterly.

"Indeed no! In fact, Tobias, one of the things we shall talk about tonight is how we will right this patent injustice."

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There were some who put it about that I was estranged from my family, but that was not the case. My father had certainly not wanted his youngest son to turn his back on success in this world and become a mere country parson; he spoke many harsh words. But they were not unforgiving—or unforgivable—words. Through the good offices of my dear mama, my family at last welcomed me back to its bosom—if not exactly as the prodigal son, because I in no wise repented my new life. Indeed, for the first visit or two, we had tip-toed round each other, as if performing a complicated Cotillion, with the steps of which no one was totally familiar. The sigh with which they bade me farewell was certainly one of regret, but I was not sure that it was not also one of relief.

However, if I was to find justice for poor William, it was to my family's milieu that I must return. The Grenfells were—like my family—part of the *ton*, the upper ten thousand families who controlled, for better and often worse, the lives of the rest. Lady Grenfell, whom even her fellow aristocrats considered decidedly high in the instep, would certainly not receive as a caller a humble country parson, but if I were staying in my father's London house, in Berkeley Square, and my mother were to accompany me, I might be positively welcome. Lady Grenfell might see it as an indication that I was at last in the marriage mart, and if my memory served me she had no fewer than five ill-favoured daughters to dispose of. My heart was by no means engaged elsewhere, I told my mother as I handed her from her carriage, but unless there had been divine intervention, I would not be seeking the hand of any one of them.

"But it would be a charitable act, my dear," Mama declared with a twinkle—she was the only one of my family who dared tease me about my calling.

"I do not think the Almighty demands my martyrdom," I responded. "Or if he did, I hope he would ask it in somewhere other than Mayfair. The very least I would hope for is to be boiled alive in Africa."

"But are you going to flirt with one of Almeria's girls?"

"I shall not mislead them—not a single heart will be even chipped, let alone broken, if I can help it. But if the only way I can speak to Lady Grenfell is when she is chaperoning her daughters, then so be it."

Lady Grenfell had enjoyed ill health for as long as I had known her. Fading behind voluminous trailing shawls, without a wisp of energy to pick up something six inches from her hand, she ruled her household with a rod of iron, thinly disguised as the vinaigrette vital to deal with her palpitations. When she had her own way, of course, there was no sign of the ill health that Dr. Hansard would surely have diagnosed as chronic boredom and acute selfishness.

This morning there was no sign of the offending diamond necklace, nor should there have been, for neither Lady Grenfell nor my

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mama would have had any hesitation in stigmatising diamonds as vulgar if worn during the hours of daylight. There were daughters a-plenty, however, all plain and simpering, apart from Miss Honoria, the next to youngest. She was quiet to the point of surliness, and in other circumstances I would have devoted myself to drawing her out, and perhaps even making her smile. But that would have been construed as flirting, and if I were to flirt with anyone it must be with someone whose heart I believed incapable of pain. The pallor of Miss Honoria's cheeks, emphasized by the dress of vicious mustard yellow she had for some reason chosen to wear, suggested feeling deeper than anything her invalidish mother had ever known.

As is the custom, we exchanged nothingnesses for precisely half an hour, at which point, correctly declining refreshment, we prepared to depart. But something was arousing Lady Grenfell from her fluttering inertia: We were the recipients of an invitation to an evening party.

"Nothing formal. Perhaps cards, perhaps three or four couples standing up to dance. You would be so welcome—" she murmured.

We bowed our acceptance and went on our way.

"Did you ever see such surprise as was on the faces of those pasty-faced dowds?" my mother demanded. "And poor Honoria in that hand-me-down that would have disgraced a nursery maid."

"I fancy all was not well with her," I mused, handing my mother into the carriage and looking significantly at the footman. My mother and others of her class enjoyed the sublime belief that persons from the lower classes were deaf, dumb, blind, and stupid. My work had shown me that the reverse was true. "Do we have any other calls to pay?"

"To Hatchard's in Piccadilly, if you will. I have lent my copy of *The Lady of the Lake* to your aunt, and find I cannot survive without it another instant. . . ."

I was too much in demand as a dancer to have a chance of speaking to Lady Grenfell at her soirée, or I might have commented on the diamonds sparkling like new about her surprisingly unlined neck. The promised three or four couples had metamorphosed into twenty or thirty, though females in the form of her five daughters heavily predominated. Even Stourton, her son, whose debts were rumoured to outstrip his father's, graced the room for a whole ten minutes, though he did no more than lean against the wall, in what he no doubt conceived to be a Byronesque way. Naturally I could not slight the poor wallflowers, and it was thus left to my mother, kindly gracing an occasion that held absolutely no charm for her, to sit in the ranks of the dowagers and chaperones and whisper behind her fan to her hostess. From the way my partners' eyes lit up at the sight, it was clear that they believed our joint futures were being discussed—each daughter smiled as voraciously as a hyena each time she caught my eye. Each except Miss Honoria,

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whose smile was at very best perfunctory.

The ballroom was no place to solicit confidences, so to her as to the others I addressed mere commonplaces, agreeing truthfully that the refreshments were excellent and lying about the quality of the Champagne. Of bigger issues, of the poor king's health, for instance, or wars overseas, there was no mention.

It was not until my mother summoned me to her boudoir and dismissed her dresser that I asked what her conversation had uncovered.

"*Uncovered*, Tobias? What an agricultural term! I heard a great deal about Almeria Grenfell's hideous ordeals, including the hideous strain of having to depose to the Warwick Assizes that her necklace had been veritably torn from her neck by a most vicious highwayman, clearly the William Scroggins who stood before her in the dock."

"*Torn from her neck?* She stated it was removed from the jewel case she concealed beneath the carriage cushions. And what were her servants, her postilions, her outriders doing the while? Do not tell me that they were too terrified by poor William's fearsome demeanour to protest! Why, the man would have been blown over by a good yell!"

"With a gun pointed inches from your employer's bosom, perhaps even a yell is too great a risk," she said drily.

"On the contrary, it would have been very good value, in my book," I retorted. "And what other *on-dits* were you privy to, Mama?"

"Would it bring you to the blush to learn that Lady Grenfell considers you most eligible?"

"I hope that you disabused her. But Mama, you joke with me. Your eyes are twinkling like her diamond necklace. Did you hear anything to arouse your suspicions?"

"Only what I have told you—that Lady Grenfell has you in her sights, my love. For, I gather, one or other of the girls must marry soon. It is clear that Grenfell is expecting the duns any moment."

I reflected on the cost of the Champagne, however inferior. "And they waste all that money on entertainment! And on a new diamond necklace."

"On *investment*, my love—for you must know that a hostess must present her best looks to a prospective son-in-law."

"Son-in-law!"

"News of an engagement would certainly stave off Grenfell's creditors."

I hung my head. "It was altogether wrong of me—"

"Nonsense! You do no more than pay a morning call and you become the property of one of her dreadful daughters? Leave them on the shelf where they have been gathering dust this age, my love."

"But what of Miss Honoria? Why is she so melancholy? She is not old enough to have been too long on the marriage mart."

Although the room was empty, Mama looked about her with the air of a conspirator. "There is a rumour—but not circulated by

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Almeria Grenfell, I do assure you—"

"By one of the other tabbies you were talking to?"

"Tabbies! I am bosom-bows with some of them! But not with Lady Cotteridge, who declared, almost unasked, that Honoria had entered into a most unsuitable *liaison*—with a gamester to whom her brother, that young scapegrace Stourton, introduced her. He even acted as go-between, would you believe?"

"He is far more than a scapegrace, Mama—well on the way to being a rake, by all accounts. And who was the man in the case? Did you discover that?"

"A Frenchman. The Comte de Valliers. Oh, he is no more a count than I am, Tobias, but a charming gamester. Beware of accepting one of *his* invitations to play at White's, I beg you!"

"Mama, a country parson plays with no one at White's, let alone an ivory turner. Now, I must bid you goodnight."

She held me at arm's length as I bent to kiss her. "Nay, these are country hours indeed, Tobias—and if you want to understand Miss Honoria's plight, should you not speak to the villain in the piece himself? Here." She reached into a drawer in her dressing-table. "You will not find this *comte* at White's, of course—such a club is far too respectable. I understand from Lady Cotteridge that he is to be found at a discreet little hell in St. James's."

"Populated by card sharps with loaded dice!"

"Indeed. But you must know," she said so serenely that I wondered what my elder brother had had in his youth to confess, "that the first time a young man presents himself they let him win for quite some time before they begin to cheat." She pressed a heavy purse into my hand.

"So that he is lulled—"

"Just so. Promise me just one thing! Quit the table the instant you lose so much as a penny. For that purse holds a goodly part of my pin money, and I should not like to have to apply to your father for more, not, at any rate, with a truthful explanation of how it disappeared."

The *soi-disant* Edmund Hansard—I had not only borrowed my mother's money, I had assumed my best friend's name—presented himself at a discreet door, naming my father as a guarantor. Papa would have been apoplectic had he known any of the night's doings, but perhaps most of all at this appropriation of his good name. I stammered that I was but a distant cousin of his lordship, but that he had encouraged me to taste the delights of the town before I returned to my village.

My card skills had never been more than third-rate, even when I played regularly, but I was not surprised to see a steady stream of guineas coming my way. I was being gulled, softened up. With what I hoped was a suitably rustic grin, I called for a bumper for all those playing, even covering with bravado my wince as I understood the cost.

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I soon found young Stourton at my elbow. There was an inner room, kept for a select few, he whispered, evincing no surprise that a man seen but two hours ago leading his sister into the dance should now be indulging in ludicrously high play. But he had dipped too deep to make rational judgments about anything. He did not even demur when I pumped him full of the expensive but throat-burning brandy I was now persuaded to buy.

Despising myself, I turned the conversation to his sisters. Like a man seeing a far distant shore with but a thin spar before him, he seized my arm and began to extol their virtues, displaying an imagination quite creditable in one so far gone.

"But Miss Honoria—" I shamelessly interrupted a disquisition on the eldest. "Tell me about her."

He raised his eyes to the heavens. "Damn me if she isn't quite in the basket."

He belched. "Shouldn't have said that. Forget it."

"Of course. Do you mean that she has behaved without discretion?"

"Fine discretion getting yourself in the family way!"

I did not have to feign my shock and horror. Such a lapse is not uncommon amongst country lads and lasses, though I have tried most strongly to discourage such behaviour. But for a gentlewoman to betray herself—truly, I was appalled.

"And the man in question—?" I prompted, as if he were one of my flock.

"Would marry her, but for one thing." He rubbed his fingers to suggest a fat dowry.

"But does her mother—?"

"No, no! Of course not."

"Her condition will manifest itself ere long," I pointed out.

"And that's the devil of it. Antoine has slipped out of the country—things were getting a bit hot for him when they discovered how he loaded the dice. When he returns, I make no doubt that he will make an honest woman of her—egad, I shall call him to account if he does not—even if I have to buy the marriage licence myself!" he concluded, with an air of positive generosity, which he rather spoilt with another belch.

"So you need to win tonight," I said, "and win well."

He shook his head. "I've cash in hand, never fret. If only I can run Antoine to earth."

"I'd heard that you were about to be hauled into a debtors' prison," I said.

"Aye, so I was—this far from the Marshalsea." He held his fingers a hair's breadth apart. "Or following Antoine to Geneva. But I had a plan. And damn me if it didn't work rather well."

"And what was the plan?"

He peered at me hazily. "Tell you what, if you're ever dunned, I'll tell you then. Until then, mum's the word." And that was the

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last I got from him.

To my amazement and horror, it was soon all about town that I was dangling after Miss Honoria. Since I had spoken to the young lady no more than one could achieve in a country dance and also knew her true position, I suspected that the origin of these rumours was none other than Lady Grenfell herself.

"I take it that you do not find these rumours likely to entice you into her family?" Mama asked, as I squired her to the Royal Academy.

"On the contrary, they raise horrible suspicions."

She narrowed her eyes. "Against whom?"

I flushed. I had not revealed even to her that Miss Honoria might be *enceinte*. "About Lady Grenfell's truthfulness," I answered at last.

"You mean in the matter of the diamond necklace?"

"Exactly. I simply cannot believe that family up to its eyes in debt buys a diamond necklace. Champagne, yes, a necklace, no. And Lady Grenfell's shone like new, did it not?"

She nodded.

"Mama, which jeweller does her ladyship patronise?"

When I indicated to John Bridge, of Messrs. Rundell and Bridge, that I wished to speak with him on a matter of some delicacy, he glanced with amazement at my clerical garb, worn for the first time in London, but swiftly returned to his usual calm and pleasant demeanour, inviting me into his private office.

"In fact, it is not a matter of *some* delicacy," I corrected myself, "but of the *utmost* delicacy—secrecy, indeed."

He bowed. "You have my word, my Lord—"

"Parson Campion," I corrected him. "I am not here on family business. I am here to enquire about the purchase of a diamond necklace."

"You know that I may not betray secrets," he demurred.

"I do indeed. Neither may I, in my calling, though the two are somewhat different. But I believe that someone has been punished for a crime he did not commit. May I ask you if anyone has recently bought a diamond necklace to replace a lost one?"

He responded to my smile with a courteous one of his own. "It is—I am pleased to say—an all too regular occurrence. But I do keep records: Perhaps if you gave me a definite name I might check? But please do not ask me to do more than confirm an absolute truth. I dare not point you in anyone's direction!"

I held his gaze. "Mr. Bridge, did Lady Grenfell purchase a copy of her stolen diamond necklace?"

"Sir, she did not."

My mother heard the news with interest. "But Almeria was certainly wearing a necklace remarkably similar to the lost one. Indeed," she added reflectively, "it positively glistered."

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"And *all that glisters is not gold!*" I quoted the proverb with gusto. More soberly I added, "I fear I have to ask a few questions—nay, not of Lady Grenfell herself. Not yet. Now, Mama, if you had to have a copy of a necklace made, to which discreet jeweller would you go?"

"To the one to which you have already been—to Rundell and Bridge, of course."

My mother had kindly invited Dr. Hansard and his wife to join us in Berkeley Square, engaging to show Mrs. Hansard the sights of the town and introduce her to her milliner and her *modiste* while Edmund and I conferred about our next move. Our dispositions were somewhat hampered by the continued presence in the capital of Miss Honoria, looking more and more unwell.

"If only her wretched lover would return and remove her from the country for good! It cannot be good for a lady in her condition to be embroiled in the scandal that is about to ensue," I said.

Dr. Hansard raised an eyebrow. "Women are a great deal tougher than is widely believed," he declared. "But her very situation must be distressing, and a wedding band, put in place by no matter how shady a gamester, might be perceived as preferable to prolonged rustication and separation from her bastard babe, which is usually the price such unfortunate girls must pay to be rehabilitated into society."

"We have no alternative but to seek out Stourton again. He must have some idea of the young man's whereabouts. He might even be prevailed on to escort his sister to whichever city he has descended upon," I added slowly.

But such an idea found no favour with Stourton. He had no particular reason not to go, but mentioned an engagement with friends, a horse to see to—all facile excuses that made my knuckles itch.

"It would be the deed of a generous brother," I urged

"When was I ever generous?" he asked with an unpleasing sincerity.

Lady Grenfell was equally unhelpful. Without suggesting outright that Miss Honoria had lost her virtue, we hinted as best we could the reason for her illness. Whether her ladyship was indeed ignorant, or else so stupid as not to understand our insinuations, I know not. But she averred without hesitation that her daughter was not at home, but had just stepped out to a lending library.

At last I could restrain myself no longer. "Lady Grenfell, may I speak to you about the diamond necklace you wore to your ball?"

How did I expect her to react? With a blush of guilt? One of her famous spasms?

Certainly not with an indulgent beam.

"Dear Stourton knew how upset I was when that monster stole it from around my very neck! He had a run of luck at cards or on the horses. . . . What a sweet boy, to purchase a replacement for me."

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"Sweet indeed," I echoed.

"So what is your latest theory?" Mama asked me indulgently, as we ate an exquisite luncheon. "Do you believe that young Stourton has such a generous spirit as to buy such a gift for a woman with whom he has scarcely been on speaking terms this last five years?"

"No," Edmund replied on my behalf. "On the contrary, I believe she suspected him of stealing it—hence her lies under oath to the court. To 'prove' his innocence, he came up with a replacement. Which may not be a replacement at all, but paste."

"Since it glisters," Mama agreed, nodding to me. "So you need to see the necklace again, but more closely. We will invite the family to dine before joining us in our box for the opera. No woman worth her salt would fail to wear her diamonds for such an event. Now what is it, Tobias?" I might have been an importunate seven-year-old tugging at her skirt.

"Would not such an invitation lend credence to this ridiculous rumour about my attachment to Miss Honoria?" I asked stiffly.

"It might indeed. Or it might shock her into confessing that she is . . . betrothed . . . to someone else."

Hansard smiled. "I see only one problem, my lady. How do we get a sufficiently close look at this necklace? It cannot be such an event as you would invite Mr. Rundell or Mr. Bridge!"

"That does not mean that they cannot give an opinion," I declared. "Mr. Bridge will only answer direct questions, not volunteer information. Last time I asked the wrong question. This time I must ask the correct one."

The party never reached the opera, but a fine drama was enacted before our eyes.

It was Miss Honoria—or rather her absence, with a trifling indisposition, according to her mama, her eyes spitting fire—who provoked what threatened to become an unseemly altercation.

Stourton looked from one cool face to the next, finished his Champagne in one gulp—a mistake, as he was already well into his cups when he arrived.

"We have such hope of you two lovers," she announced, with a hard titter and a smile in my direction. "Do we not, Stourton?"

"I am sure Stourton has no such thing," I declared, incensed. "Stourton knows that Miss Honoria's feelings are engaged elsewhere, and he is in fact about to take his sister to her intended."

"Am I, old chap? I think not."

"I think so indeed," I persevered. "You have a great deal of money at your disposal, have you not? And you might as well spend it on someone who—if not precisely deserving—is in need of it. And once you have reached Geneva—"

"Geneva!" he snorted. "I learned today that he has fled to

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Canada! Catch me going there!"

"Well, you will escort your sister there instead. I suggest that you stay there. In fact, if you ever return to this country, you will almost certainly hang."

As we had arranged, Hansard was carefully watching not me or Stourton, but Lady Grenfell. In a moment he was at her side, producing smelling salts and pressing her back into her chair. "Nay, your Ladyship—please remain seated. I cannot answer for your health otherwise." As he plied the vinaigrette, he most deftly unfastened her necklace.

"Hang? Why should a gentleman hang?" Stourton asked insolently, but with a pallor that suggested he knew exactly why.

"For sending an innocent man to the gallows. That poor wretch whom you identified in court, ma'am, was entirely innocent, as I am sure you know. You recognised your son as he robbed you. What words you exchanged subsequently I can only imagine. But I suspect that you demanded the return of your property as the price of your silence—a reasonable request, after all. What mother would want her son to swing? Accordingly, your necklace was returned. As a gesture of remorse, your son had even had it cleaned. It looked very fine. But in fact, Lady Grenfell, your son reneged on the deal. He had the necklace copied." So much had Mr. Bridge confirmed.

"Indeed, these are but trumpery beads!" Hansard concluded, casting them at her feet.

"Do you now object to Stourton's journey abroad?" I asked. "I cannot think so, because he will of course be escorting you, ma'am. You may have had no hand in the robbery, but you committed perjury of the very worst sort. You sent an innocent man to a hideous death. You deserve—you *both* deserve—to be handed over to the law this very evening. But we will be generous where you were not. We will give you till tomorrow night to quit these shores forever, with a written undertaking that you will never return—and, of course, why. Go now. I fear our dinner engagement must be cancelled."

"At least poor Honoria will have her mother beside her when she marries," Mama declared sentimentally. "And when she delivers her child."

"I think not, ma'am," Hansard said, staring down at the fire. "You tell me that she has long cried wolf in the matter of her health. So I fear that no one will take any notice at her next spasm or the next but one. But I can tell you that her pulse indicates the most serious of heart conditions. She will not reach Canada if the crossing is rough."

"She would be buried at sea?" I asked slowly.

"In all probability."

"Then truly God moves in mysterious ways. I thought that we had let the pair off lightly. But now it seems that poor William is truly avenged after all." ●

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EVENT RISK

by Mike Wiecek

A winner of the PWA's Shamus Award for best short story, in 2006, and a two-time winner of the Derringer Award for best short story, Mike Wiecek makes a first appearance in *EQMM* here with a tale of the murderous side of a high-rolling businessman. He is the author of the 2005 novel *Exit Strategy* (Jove), which received a nomination from the International Thriller Writers for their best-novel award.

I admit, I thought hard before agreeing to meet Tarnbeck where he wanted. Generally, my clients are keen to conduct our business in private—they need to see me in person, but they're more than skittish about potential blowback. Tarnbeck, evidently marching to a different drummer, suggested the shooting range at his club.

"What?" I wasn't sure I heard him right on the cell phone.

"I try to fire a few hundred rounds a week. You have to practice too, right? We'll make it a working meeting."

I do keep up my training, in fact, but that's part of my job. Tarnbeck was CEO of a six-billion-dollar manufacturing company. Did I have any lunatic enemies devious enough to arrange a hit in Connecticut's third-priciest country club?

But I needed the work, so I said yes. Life is too short to worry whether ninjas had infiltrated the blue-blazer set.

So there we were, two guys on the outdoor range in perfect weather: cool, overcast, and no wind whatsoever. October in Fairfield County can go either way, what with global warming and all, but we'd lucked out. A few gold and red leaves had escaped the grounds crew, lying on the greensward between asphalted shooting strips. Before we started, I couldn't see a single gleam of brass anywhere, even in the berm behind the target row, which meant the groundskeepers were spending hours picking over the lawn every night.

When did golfing and squash give way to semiautomatic weapons? I tell you, New Money has too much time on its hands.

"Nice handgun," Tarnbeck had said when I pulled out the Sig

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P226 I normally use. He had an unmodified Model 1911 himself, and from fifty yards was plinking the headplates steadily, six at a time. I'll say this for him, he looked good: about sixty, with a runner's rangy build, a silver brush cut, and a nice, easy stance while he popped away. I used the big Mickey Mouse ears—I value my hearing—but Tarnbeck stayed with the small foam plugs favored by those with an image to protect.

Of course, that meant we could barely hear each other, and I wasn't about to go hollering out our business. So the conversation proceeded fitfully during reloads, when I could loosen the earmuffs.

"Here's the problem," he said as we refilled our magazines. "This blowhard died in my boardroom the other day."

"I heard." It was in the papers. Tarnbeck's company was "exploring strategic alternatives," as they say, and one of the suitors, some private-equity partner, had keeled over during a private negotiation. "Heart attack. You have a liability issue?"

"Of course not." Tarnbeck glanced at me impatiently. "He should have cut back on the steaks and whiskey a long time ago."

"How fast did EMS get there?" Call it professional curiosity—911 response time sometimes matters to me, for all kinds of reasons.

"A few minutes." He shrugged, finished with his last magazine, and snapped it back into the pistol. "Long enough for everyone else in the room to speed-dial his broker."

That was a nice image: The guy on the floor gasping and clutching at his chest while all around him his pals were busy shorting his debt. Tarnbeck grinned and stepped back to the line, raising his pistol.

Five minutes later we started up again.

"Someone's trying to horn in on my buyout," Tarnbeck said. "Buying our stock on the sly, raising money in the unregulated markets. It's got the bankers all jumpy about event risk, so they're jacking up our short-term rates. Lots of rumors, and I have no idea who's behind it all."

"Nothing in the 13-D's?" The SEC requires investors to fess up once they've acquired more than five percent of a public company, for just this reason.

"Not for another week. It's too recent."

"So you've got another bidder." Tarnbeck nodded shortly, and started shooting again.

I could see the problem. Tarnbeck wanted to take the company private himself. As CEO, he knew exactly where he could slash and burn, to cash out asset value hidden from current shareholders. If some other buyout group outbid him, not only would Tarnbeck lose the deal and its hundreds of millions of easy money, he'd also surely lose his job. He wanted the LBO, and he wanted it cheap, and some jackal had shown up to contest the carcass.

Of course, the shareholders—whose interests Tarnbeck was sup-

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posed to represent—would benefit from a higher price. Can you say, conflict of interest?

We moved back to 75 yards and switched to silhouette targets. Long range for handguns, though Tarnbeck kept his groupings impressively tight. You could tell that everything he did he made into a competition, and he was obviously paying attention to my own results. So I let my shots drift around, mostly on the paper but randomly spaced. Hey, I needed the job.

"I guess I know why you looked me up," I said, while we waited for the rangemaster to trot out more boxes of ammo.

Tarnbeck nodded, looking straight at me. "Lots of investigators could find out who it is," he said. "Probably quicker than you, too. But then what, they're gonna write me a report? I need this problem settled for good."

"For good," I repeated.

"You know what I mean. Do I have to spell it out?"

The dead guy in his boardroom must have been an inspiration. I sounded him out on fees, and he was sensible enough not to nickel-and-dime the bonus calculation, so we got to a handshake quick enough.

Tarnbeck didn't turn back to the targets, though. He stood watching me, thoughtful, keeping his pistol pointed correctly downrange.

"I wonder," he said. "This amounts to inside knowledge. A man in your position could arrange to profit on any number of side trades ahead of the, ah, precipitating event."

The smarter ones figure this out. "That's right."

Tarnbeck thought about it some more. "But . . . you don't have the capital to make it worthwhile, do you?"

Like, twenty percent of nothing is still nothing. Maybe it's a cliché, but it's still true: You got to have money to make money.

"I'm not living off investments," I said. "I earn my pay."

"Got it." Tarnbeck seemed satisfied. "Sure you don't want to shoot some more?"

"No." I had already put the Sig away. "My hand hurts."

Normal accountants complete their assignments with an audit report and a stack of spreadsheets. My jobs might start out the same way, but they generally end up requiring, say, unlicensed firearms, or lengths of piano wire. Sure, Tarnbeck could have gotten a straight financial investigator cheaper than me. But he wasn't interested in the numbers, he was buying an *outcome*. All the letters you might have after your name—C.P.A., M.B.A., CFE, whatever—just aren't going to handle that last bit.

It's a good niche. Keeps the fees high.

I started the search for Tarnbeck's anonymous raider the usual way: calling around to see if anyone would simply tell me the

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answer. Poring over endless pages of proprietary financials, which seem always to be printed in seven-point type, is a last resort. Tarnbeck was right; the traders were full of gossip, none of it particularly helpful. The stock's volume had more than doubled over the last month, with sharp peaks at odd times of day—11:15 A.M., 1:30 P.M., like that. Someone was out there, taking bites. But the big purchases were being routed through the all-electronic ECNs, impossible to backtrack.

"Everyone on the east coast of North America knows they're in play," said Johnny, generously giving me about a third of his conscious attention. His eyes stayed on the five monitors—no, six, he'd added another flat-panel since I last visited—that were streaming market data, news, and blogosphere rants. "And half of them are ready to make an offer. Tarnbeck's roadkill."

Johnny and I were both finance majors in college, but afterwards, while I was learning how to jump out of airplanes and field-strip a .50 Cal, Johnny was clawing his way from entry-level I-banking to, eventually, running his own hedge fund. Who made the better choice is a topic for another day.

I'd come down to his Beaver Street offices, where he oversaw a roomful of twenty-something traders, a floor-to-ceiling panorama of the Hudson River skyline, and 900 million dollars of smart money. The traders all seemed to have ADHD. Johnny's style was incremental; he could go in and out of positions in less than thirty seconds. Breakfast and lunch were catered every day, but the food mostly sat around getting cold, and the only consistent nourishment seemed to be cans of Red Bull and Jolt. In these days of algorithmic technical strategies, it was all quaintly retro.

"Are you in?" I asked.

"Nah."

"You don't like the company?"

"Oh, it's good enough. All those factories in the Midwest, so Old Economy. Nice pickings."

"So, what? You think the field's too crowded?"

Johnny shrugged and tapped his keyboard. Some day trader probably just got wiped out. "It feels funny, that's all."

"Funny?"

"I dunno. You know. Funny."

Well, he was worth about a hundred million dollars, and I wasn't. I guess I'd trust his intuition. We talked about other matters—as a favor, Johnny runs some of my money in a beneficial account—but I left soon enough. Ten minutes is about all you can get out of him during exchange hours.

Tarnbeck probably thought I'd be chasing his bugbear all by myself, down the mean streets of Greenwich with nothing but attitude and an equalizer. Truth is, I'd have preferred that myself—

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nobody likes to split a fee—but sometimes these jobs are just too much trouble. If Johnny didn't know whose door to knock on, I was in for a real plod. I needed help.

I didn't have to think about who to ask. This kid named Leeson had been hanging around, buying me drinks and listening to stories. He was young, smart, and hungry—a little too eager to make a name for himself, maybe, but so were we all, once. He jumped at the chance to sign on, not even complaining about the hod-carrier's wage I offered.

We met at the docks—not the working waterfront, but a glitzy marina on Stamford Harbor, filled with gleaming power cruisers and sailboats with computer-controlled ropes. I mean, sheets. Leeson, though he had some good points, was some kind of yachting fanatic. He loved sitting on the dock, squinting and grinning and explaining all that pointless seafaring jargon.

At least it was close to Tarnbeck's corporate headquarters.

"So what's the job?" Leeson finally got around to asking. A steady breeze blew off the ocean, cold and damp under the cloudy sky. Leeson, with that casual invincibility to inclement weather you have in your twenties, sat comfortably on the freezing bench. I pulled my jacket zipper all the way up and tried not to huddle into it too obviously.

"I have a client with a business rival," I said. "He'd like the rival to go away."

"That's what we do." Leeson nodded crisply, and I thought, *we?* Look, I've been in this game for years, but Leeson was just a snot-nose C.P.A. Yeah, I know, he was in the Marines and Iraq and all that, before he went back to college, but that's the problem—anyone lucky enough to survive a year in Anbar thinks he's seen it all.

"Whatever. Here's the problem—nobody knows who the rival is." I explained the situation, how Tarnbeck needed to find out exactly which vulture fund was trying to kick the blocks out from his LBO.

Leeson's reaction was unexpected. He lost all interest in the boats, even when a trio of women crew walked past, young and blonde and openly checking him out. He just whistled out a long breath and said, slowly, "I'll be . . . Tarnbeck? Tarnbeck. Wow."

I frowned. "What about him?"

"Gerald A. Tarnbeck." Like he was reading a cue card. "Sixty-three, five-foot-ten, left-handed, married twice but not for long, no children, residences in New Canaan, the Upper East Side, and Nassau, drives a silver Range Rover."

A long pause. "I don't know about the car," I said.

"And as of last Tuesday, ATF transaction records showed him in possession of twenty-one handguns, eight long guns, ten semiautomatic rifles, and three shotguns."

I stared at Leeson, and he gave it back without blinking. Seagulls cawed, water slapped at the dock pilings, and halyards

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banged on their spars. I was learning all sorts of useful information today, not just nautical vocabulary.

"I don't suppose he hired you, too," I said. We were edging away from each other on the bench, looking for fighting room, like a pair of cats who just decided they're deathly enemies. "How'd you get into ATF?"

"On the Internet. Data brokers can get whatever you want."

"Really? I should look into that."

"Sure. Costs, though. There's a guy in Colorado I like." He was almost on his feet now, every muscle tense.

Time to stop stalling. "At least I don't have to keep looking for Tarnbeck's nemesis," I said. "Want to tell me who it is?"

Leeson shrugged, a fractional lift of one shoulder. "Why would I do that?"

Well, it was worth asking. A few moments passed.

"This is stupid," I said finally. "He hired you to whack Tarnbeck, right? He must think that'll make the acquisition easier, since Tarnbeck would probably rather see the whole place go bankrupt before handing it over."

Leeson wasn't ready to concede anything, and he just grunted.

"So instead of, you know, working it out in a meeting or something, they take contracts out on each other." I shook my head. "Good thing they're introducing those mandatory ethics seminars in the business schools."

"It's been nice talking to you." Leeson stood up, ready to back away.

"Oh, sit down. I promise I won't try to shoot you. What's the point? I don't get paid unless your guy's six feet under, and Tarnbeck's sure not worth dying over. Let's try to figure this out."

He might have left anyway, but the three boat bunnies walked past again, giggling, and Leeson, unable to hold too many thoughts at once, was flustered enough to rejoin me on the bench.

"You're thinking, all you have to do is land Tarnbeck first," I said. "Pop him and you win. But if I get to your guy, you lose anyway, since you won't get paid."

Leeson relaxed, obviously feeling he had the advantage. "You have no idea who he is."

"It won't take as long as I thought—not now that I know he hired you. It's not a needle in a haystack anymore." Leeson wasn't getting it, so I had to explain. "You met him in person. I'm sure of that. They always need to see us themselves, right? So all I have to do is walk *you* back. And that's a lot easier."

It started to drizzle. How nice. Leeson, Boy Scout, pulled a ball cap out of the pocket of his windbreaker. I sighed and frowned and got wet.

"It's a race, then," said Leeson, cheering up after he thought about it. "Want to synchronize watches?"

"Use your head. Once you're on your way, first thing I'm going to

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do is call Tarnbeck and warn him. He'll be locked down so tight you'd have a better chance at the Pope."

"Oh." Leeson's good mood evaporated. "But I'll do the same thing."

"Of course. So, stalemate."

We watched rain fall onto the boats. My pants and jacket gradually soaked through, but I had to ignore it, since Leeson didn't seem to notice.

"Wait, I got an idea," he said suddenly. "We can work together. It's perfect."

"How so?"

"You set Tarnbeck up, I shoot him, we split my fee."

I admit, I thought about it. But in the end I decided that, as limited as my chosen vocation's ethics might be, killing my own client for the sake of an easier buck just wasn't on. Word might leak out, after all, and then no one would ever hire me again.

"Still, you might be on to something," I said. "How about, we only *pretend* to zap Tarnbeck?"

"Huh?"

"Hollywood-style, fake bullets and everything. Make it a real show."

"But . . ."

I played the scenario out in my mind. "Look. It'll make the news, so you get paid. Better yet, once everyone thinks Tarnbeck is gone, there's no more reason for secrecy, so your Green Hornet can take his mask off. And that'll give Tarnbeck what *he* wants."

Leeson wasn't keeping up. "But . . ." he said again. "Okay, I see how I earn my fee. But how do you make anything out of it?"

"After you ride off into the sunset, what do you care? I'll finish my assignment for Tarnbeck, bye-bye Green Hornet, and there we go, everyone's happy. I'd call that a win-win-win." I paused. "Well, except for the dead guy."

That bothered Leeson, oh, about as much as you'd imagine, but he thought up another objection. "We'd both be taking the same risk," he said slowly. "How do I know we're, you know, getting an equal reward?"

"I get paid, you get paid. What's the problem?"

"Yeah, but . . . how much are you making on this?"

We looked at each other.

"You first," I said.

After some fruitless sparring, we tabled the question of compensation. At least Leeson was excited by the whole special-effects aspect—it's true, everyone really does want to be in the movies.

As we finished up, the rain now a steady downpour, sheets of water coursing across the dock, Leeson thought of one last question.

"How are you going to convince Tarnbeck to go along?" he asked. "I mean, why would he?"

"Don't worry," I said. "He's eating out of my hand. He'll do

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whatever I suggest."

"You're out of your mind." Tarnbeck glared at me like I'd just asked to marry his daughter. "Bobby Jakes told me you were okay, but he must have been off his meds. That's the stupidest idea I've ever heard."

We were in his car—a Range Rover, yes, but shiny white, not silver. So much for Leeson's backgrounding. Tarnbeck was driving, and he'd picked me up not far from his house at six A.M., on the way to the office. No driver, which was unusual for a major-league CEO. I suppose he wanted to keep our conversation private.

Horns blared on both sides, and Tarnbeck snapped his attention back to the road, just in time to slam on the brakes. Tires screeched as a Lexus missed us by inches, and a motorcycle roared past on the right. I glanced back and saw another vehicle slew out of control, skidding to the side of the street but not running into us. Tarnbeck growled and yanked the wheel, back into traffic.

"You want me to find him the usual way, fine," I said. "But it's going to take time—longer than I think you have. Once another offer's on the table, your board is obligated to consider it."

"I pay those freeloading morons a hundred grand to play golf together four times a year. They'll do what I tell them." Tarnbeck seemed comfortable with nineteenth-century notions of corporate governance. "I'll get a unanimous vote, don't worry about that."

"Maybe." If the board was that venal, they'd no doubt jump ship for an extra ten percent, but I didn't want to get into it with Tarnbeck. They were probably his friends. "I know Congress is pulling back the reins on Sarbanes-Oxley, but there've been too many lawsuits against directors lately. Unlimited personal liability can encourage some inconvenient backbone."

"Bah."

"Anyway, you might be looking at this through too narrow a lens."

"What?" Tarnbeck glanced at me, but only briefly. These backroads were surprisingly crowded for dawn—all the exurb-to-suburb commuters trying to beat rush hour, I guess. Cars filled the drive-through lanes of the bagel and coffee shops we kept passing, and we had to sit through at least two cycles at every stoplight. Give me downtown Manhattan any day, thanks.

"You've been CEO for, what, eleven years?" I said. An eternity, for a public company in 2008. "Let me ask you something. Do you really know who your friends are?"

Tarnbeck grunted. He was smart enough to understand what I meant, and not be offended by it. Executives at the very top live in a bubble, a cocoon of sycophancy and fawning agreement. Even the sharpest, most cynical tyrants can lose perspective.

"When the world thinks you're dead," I continued, "we won't just flush out your anonymous rival for the LBO. There'll be a window

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of uncertainty when everyone's true colors will be visible. You'll learn more about your staff than you would in six months of team-building retreats."

I don't know if it was that possibility that convinced him, or his own secret desire to star in a movie, or maybe just despair at getting anything more useful out of me. But by the time we rolled into the VIP lot of his corporate headquarters, Tarnbeck had signed on.

"Where do we do it?" he asked, pulling into a large, marked space with its own immaculate patch of lawn and a sidewalk gleaming in the first golden rays of sunrise.

"Good question." We stayed in the Rover to finish talking. "It needs to be public, more or less, so people will be around to see it. But it can't be too public, because we need to set it all up beforehand and, ah, control for eventualities."

"How about in front of my house?"

"Hmm, no, I don't think so. It's too private, with that ten-foot spiked fence and the guardhouse and the dobermans in the yard." Like everyone lived that way. "And the shooting range isn't so hot either, not with all that live ammunition around."

"So?"

"How about right here?" I gestured at the parking lot. "Lots of witnesses will look out those windows and swear they saw you assassinated in broad daylight. Including the FedEx guy and maybe some visitors, if we time it right. But it's all your property, so we'll be able to manage the environment."

He didn't take much convincing. It's one of the few admirable traits I've noticed among the C-level executives I deal with—once they make a decision, they never look back.

We brainstormed some ideas, worked through the logistics, considered the best way to handle the immediate response. By the time we wrapped up, Tarnbeck was chuffed, happier than I'd seen him yet.

"Just one question," he said, as we shook hands. I was about to go call a taxi, and he had underlings headed his way from the building's grand entrance. "You've done this before, right?"

"Of course," I said. "Many, many times."

"Good."

"It's all in the planning—we do a good job ahead of time, and it'll run like clockwork."

"All right, then." He nodded and abruptly turned away, off to shape the lives of fifty thousand employees.

I've never failed to fulfill a contract yet. Clockwork.

The first thing that went wrong was the weather: more rain, cold and steady and depressing. The action itself wouldn't be affected—assassins, even fake ones, work in all conditions, and the FX gimmickry under Tarnbeck's shirt was durable enough—but our audience would be much reduced. I wasn't about to reschedule,

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though. Tarnbeck's worst micro-managing instincts had emerged over the last five days, as we scripted the play. No detail was too minute for him to offer a contrary opinion. Shouldn't we be using .233-caliber rounds, like in *The Unit*? Maybe he should fall backward onto the Range Rover's hood, roll over, and crawl a little? Could we leave some red herrings on the grassy knoll, like a donut bag and some hand-rolled cigarette butts? He was calling me at three A.M. with ideas like that, for Christ's sake.

Like I said, everyone wants to be a movie star.

To maximize viewer share, Tarnbeck contrived some excuse to show up at work a few hours later than his customary pre-dawn arrival. The security guards were in on it, too, so we wouldn't have any unfortunate live-ammunition heroics. Or so I hoped—Tarnbeck was supposed to arrange all that, since I didn't want anyone to see my face but him. We'd practiced the whole scenario in a big empty lot at one of the manufacturing plants Tarnbeck had shuttered last year, after outsourcing production to China. It had come out just right.

At eight-thirty I parked a borrowed utility truck outside the discreet wire fence that surrounded the headquarters campus. Across two hundred yards of lawn, down a slight slope, I had a nice open view of the main building and its parking lot. Of course, anyone looking the other way had an equally nice view of me, but that was the whole point. I was going to stand up on top of the truck, out in front of God and everyone, holding a Dragunov rifle with Leupold glass and, just for show, a mounted bayonet. How video game is that? I'd even gotten a Lone Ranger mask from a party store at the mall. Not exactly *Day of the Jackal,* but we were keeping the plot line simple.

An hour later, the lot was half filled, a couple of package-delivery trucks idled near the entrance, and people were occasionally dashing from their cars to the building, holding umbrellas or laptop cases over their heads against the downpour. At the front gate I saw the white Range Rover roll in, just as my cell phone rang.

"Ready?" Tarnbeck must have forgotten he wasn't supposed to call.

"All set." I looked at the rain coursing down the windshield and wished I'd brought full waterproofs. "It'll be just like the run-through."

"See you in the morgue."

During the half-minute it took Tarnbeck to reach his spot, I clambered out and onto the roof, slipping and swearing. The Jackal would have been inside the vehicle, of course, warm and dry and holding his rifle on a tripod. I lifted the Dragunov "standing unsupported"—that is, Rambo style—and found the Range Rover in the scope.

And here's where you ask, why the hell did I load real ammunition? I didn't need to fire any rounds at all, even blanks—all the visuals were set up at Tarnbeck's end. But for whatever reason, habit or caution or, who knows, maybe I'm just a psychopath, the

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magazine held a full ten rounds. Nothing fancy, just out-of-the-box hollowpoints, but hey, I was only two hundred yards away.

Tarnbeck stopped the Rover, and I saw its exhaust plume die away. A moment later his door opened. He stepped out, carefully, and paused before stepping away from the vehicle. He turned to close the door—

Shots. Despite the falling rain and the distance I heard the double-taps clearly. Two close together, then two more, and two more. Tarnbeck's head exploded, his face a mess of red, even as more blood appeared on his jacket. The fake blood-packs burst through his shirt on cue, pointlessly. He stumbled and collapsed.

I'm embarrassed to say I had a moment of complete confusion: Had *I* pulled the trigger? Primed with a loaded sniper rifle, had I gone and killed him on autopilot?

Of course not. Rationality returned after a second, and I swung rapidly around, looking for a second shooter. It helped that I'd thoroughly mapped the terrain beforehand, when we were sketching out our little drama. Only a couple other locations offered clear sightlines and an easy exit—but it didn't matter, I found the guy immediately. He was lying across the hood of a dull-colored sedan a hundred yards further up the hill behind me, holding his long gun in a clean Hawkins stance. Even as I brought the Dragunov up to get a closer look in the scope, he stood and brought his weapon over my way.

For a moment we stared at each other, through 10x magnification. My surprise was surely greater than his, for he must have expected me, but we fired simultaneously. What can I say?—I was lucky. His bullet cracked past my left ear. Mine struck him in his sternum, and he fell backward, dropping his weapon, to land sprawled in the mud by his car's wheel well.

One of my maxims is that damage control, in this business, begins with lots more damage. I fired the Dragunov's remaining nine rounds into the claim-jumper, hopped off the truck's roof, and threw the rifle into the cab. No time to run over and stab him with the bayonet a few times, even though I really, really wanted to. I floored the pedal, the ancient GMC diesel groaning as it slowly got up to speed, and glanced back once when I crossed the entrance road.

The rain had eased, and faces were at all the windows I could see. A few brave or stupid suits had run out to crouch around Tarnbeck. Two golfcarts with security logos bumped across the lawn in the same direction. All that was missing was news 'copters and TV vans, and they'd be along soon enough.

We'd gotten our spectacle. Too bad Leeson had upstaged me.

Considering I had to improvise the next half-hour, I think it came out pretty good. On the one hand, I'd just killed a guy. On the

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other hand, he had himself just assassinated a Fortune-400 CEO in broad daylight. The police were going to need a battering ram to get through the media crews. I just had to use this attention to my favor.

Like I said earlier, I'd planned my mission with almost as much care as if it had been real, including the aftermath. So I had a few exit routes mapped out. I chose number two, since it took the backroads.

The utility truck was clean—I mean, it was filthy and greasy, but I'd worn gloves the whole time. Purple nitrile, like I was some middle-aged scrub nurse. I'll be honest here, latex gives me a rash . . . anyway, I was planning to bundle up my clothes and drop them off at the incinerator later. The technicians wouldn't get any useful forensics from the vehicle. The rifle, though, that was a problem. The damn thing was nearly five feet long, and it didn't disassemble into some 007 briefcase either.

In the end, I found a pen and a sheet of paper in the clutter overflowing the cab, and in big letters I wrote: "I WAS DRIVIN BY AND I SAW A MURDUR, SO I SHOT THE CRIMINEL FOR YOU. DONT THANK ME, JUST A GOOD CITIZIN." I swept all the debris off the dashboard and put the paper in plain view, with the rifle propped upright on the driver's seat. With the door locked, of course, in case some light-fingered opportunist found it first. Then I called Channel 2 from a pay phone, told them exactly where I'd parked, and walked over to my getaway car.

You're maybe thinking how careless I was, leaving my own handwriting out for CSI to have fun with. No worries. I used the edge of a clipboard as ruler, printing each stroke of each letter as a separate, straight line. Took awhile, but it created a dead end for the graphologists. I read about that in a novel years ago, and I always wanted to use it.

So I got away clean. Those crack newshounds almost didn't find the truck first—I should have given better directions, I guess—but they beat the police, and my little note got pride of place in all the coverage. Once the honest-justice storyline was established, no subsequent facts could budge it. The press gleefully slandered Tarnbeck, glad to have a greedy rich guy to kick around, especially one who could no longer sue for libel. Martha Stewart was only in jail for a few months; Ken Lay went to heaven before he could even be sentenced; and Kobi Alexander is still living like a billionaire king in Namibia. It was about time that some pondscum CEO finally paid for his crimes, and, unfortunately for Tarnbeck's posthumous reputation, the *Zeitgeist* nominated him. Glaring logical inconsistencies in the narrative didn't seem to matter. Anyway, it was out of the headlines after a week.

There was, however, the small matter of my pay. Leeson had obviously been trying to take advantage of my gullibility to close out his own contract, keeping all the money for himself and setting

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me up for the fall in the bargain. Yes, in his case justice was served, but I sure didn't see any of *that* cash. And even if I'd had a signed piece of paper to wave in the faces of Tarnbeck's successors, I couldn't claim to have done what I was hired for, so no joy there either.

I never even found out who the Green Hornet was.

But I'll let you in on a small trade secret. Like you might expect, about thirty seconds after Tarnbeck got the last big surprise of his life, his company's stock plunged. Plenty of those faces in the windows must have gone and sold their shares immediately. By the end of the day the price was down eighteen percent—and another five percent before opening the next morning. Now, like I said, that's just not enough for me to make anything on—twenty-three percent of the pocket change I have invested is so paltry I don't want to talk about it. But a hedge fund, with a few hundred million to wager, well, that's a different story. Remember, the original plan was for the whole world to think Tarnbeck was dead—which would have meant the exact same result. What I did was, I tipped Johnny off beforehand. When Tarnbeck suffered his myocardial infarction—you know, his arteries got all clogged, with lead, get it?—Johnny did very, very well.

In fact, I think I can take credit for about two-thirds of his aggregate returns that quarter. And he was honorable enough to make sure I saw a fair piece of it, in my own account.

"I'm not going to ask," Johnny said a few weeks later, when I stopped in. "I'm not interested, it doesn't bother me, I don't want to know."

The other traders were yelling at each other, telling rude jokes on speakerphone, gulping their liquid caffeine; sunlight reflected from window glass up and down the Hudson; and Johnny's wall of data flashed and scrolled and updated. Just like any other day.

"I heard some rumors," I said. "That's all. Sometimes you get lucky."

"Lucky." Johnny laughed. "Not like Tarnbeck."

"He had a very nice life, before it ended. Let's remember him that way."

One of the phones on Johnny's desk buzzed. He picked up the receiver, then looked at the Caller-ID display and hung up without answering.

"I heard some rumors, too," he said.

"Hmm."

"In the market, but no one noticed until after. There was odd movement in the company's options that morning."

"No kidding?"

"Out-of-the-money puts were being snapped up—it drove the volatility crazy. Someone was betting serious money on a big drop in the share price."

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"Well, I didn't tell anyone. But you know how hard it is to keep a secret."

"That's not the funny part." Johnny glanced up with his punchline. "The puts weren't resold, and a few days later, most of them expired without being exercised."

I had to think about it for a moment. "I'll be damned. Tarnbeck was betting on his own death, wasn't he?"

"That's what I figure." Johnny went back to his screens. "He obviously thought he'd be around to collect."

The noise level rose, as one of Johnny's traders started jumping up and down and pumping his arms like he'd just caught the touchdown pass. A couple others threw wadded paper and binder clips at him. It could have been eighth grade.

"Life goes on." Johnny seemed to be executing a trade, tapping away, back at work.

"I think I need a vacation," I said.●

Blog Bytes (continued from page 46) Recent posts include reviews of crime novels from Sweden, as well as commentary on the late Derek Raymond and his works, along with reviews of new novels by Benjamin Black and Declan Hughes.

If you're interested in crime with a Mediterranean flavor, you'll want to be sure to check out *Italian-mysteries.com* **(http://italian-mysteries.com)**, which lists over 750 crime novels published in English but set in Italy. The lists are divided into subgenre and even into historical periods. You can find interviews with authors, a list of films based on books set in Italy, reviews and ratings, and a lot more. You'll need to set aside plenty of time to explore this site because there's so much there.

Karen Meeks's *Euro Crime* **(http://www.eurocrime.co.uk)** Web site has links to reviews, homepages of European authors, contests for free books, awards, a list of forthcoming books, and to Meeks's Euro Crime blog, which delivers "snippets about British and other European crime fiction, TV, and film."

Passport to Murder **(http://www.londonlibraries.org/servlets/llr/passport)** is a site compiled by London librarians. It offers "a selection of classic and contemporary crime fiction by European authors." If you're feeling smart, there's also a quiz that will allow you to "investigate your knowledge of criminal fact and fiction." I didn't do well on the quiz, which proves that I still have a lot to learn about European crime writing. Sites like this one will give me a lot of help.●

Bill Crider's own peculiar blog, Bill Crider's Pop Culture Magazine, can be found at http://billcrider.blogspot.com.

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DEPARTMENT OF FIRST STORIES

AN ILL WIND

by Amelia Symington

Amelia Symington is the pen name of a Canadian who came to "the States" to go to graduate school and fell in love with an American. With her husband and daughter, she lived in New England for a while, where she walked along the ocean for the first time, and experienced the climate and setting that provide the ambiance for this first story.

The sands were drifting into the corpse's eyes and falling into the open mouth. He was lying on his back and his belly made an unnatural mound on the flat beach, a slight hill that was skirted by the scurrying crabs and small birds. The tide was coming in, but he lay high above the tide line, most likely safe from the pull of the ocean. On the other hand, the wind was picking up, and with the storm offshore it was hard to be sure exactly where the high-tide line would be in the next twenty-four hours.

Wally stood at the corpse's feet, holding his dog, B.D., on a short leash.

"Don't you go messing up the scene of the crime." he said.

B.D. obeyed the tone of voice and calmed down. Like his owner, he was a shaggy, thin old mutt without the energy to fuss for long.

Wally considered his options. The wind was coming on strong and the forecast was for the last real blow of the season, maybe a bad storm, maybe hurricane strong. The body could easily be buried before the afternoon was out. He walked here every day and he could find it again, if he had the time and brought the dog. But the new sheriff wouldn't want to wait. In Wally's opinion, the young man was way too eager to consolidate his newly elected position by doing, doing, doing.

That's not going to impress people, he thought. What they want is loyalty and safety and someone they can call on when they really need a hand. That's what Wally himself had done for twenty-five years. He was only mildly annoyed that he'd lost the election last year to the new guy. Another man would have fumed and maybe

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undermined the new guy's authority, but not Wally. For example, he could wait and call the sheriff later, after he got home. All it would take was a small lie, that he'd forgotten his cell phone. Then, the sheriff would have to wait until the next day, which was the sensible thing with this storm coming up. But it was the sheriff's call, not his.

Wally pulled his cell phone out of the pocket of his old jeans. First he took a picture of the corpse's face. Anyone could see it was Gene Barnes. Then he took a couple of the body. There were no visible wounds, no pool of blood anywhere. A small flask was visible next to the right hand. Not surprising, since the body stank of alcohol. Then, Wally stood with his back to the ocean and took a quick picture of the few scraggly trees perched on the edge of the beach. They looked like outcasts stranded so far from the line of other small trees that stretched thick and scrubby on either side of this bare hundred yards or so of shoreline. Next he took a shot to the north and another to the south. It seemed unnecessary, but the new sheriff had posted this procedure on his personal Web site for citizens who came across just this sort of thing. Using "triangulation" was supposed to pinpoint the scene for the coroner or the judge or even the jury if it came to that. Wally punched in the sheriff's e-mail address (Bradley@yoursherriff.org) and sent the photos off to him. Finally, Wally punched in his old work number. At least Bradley hadn't changed that.

"Hello, Bradley? Gene Barnes is dead and stinking up the beach down here about a mile north of the Sparrow Beach stairs. I just sent you pictures."

"Don't touch a thing, I'll be right there." To Wally's ears he sounded excited and ready to roll.

"I'll wait for you down at the stairs," Wally said, hanging up without waiting for Bradley's advice and starting down the beach with B.D. in tow.

Some people hated the New England hurricane season, but not Wally. It got your juices flowing, brought neighbors out of their houses and away from their solitary TV sets. In his experience, people were better than generally given credit for, especially when they had an excuse for helping one another out. Now was the time to make a phone call to check on the young mother whose husband was on the road, a quick stop by a retired couple to be sure they had the windows nailed tight, a call to the cousins to assure them all was well. He and Terry were never busier than those days when the storms were threatening. She used to say that the wind sort of blew folks together. Now, the winds reminded him of her, his beloved wife, dead and gone for three long years.

Of course, there were some people who weren't like that. There were folks who would rob you blind any day of the week, as soon as look at you. Guys like Gene Barnes, for example. As owner and sole worker at Gene's Garage, he was a good mechanic, when he

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was feeling "born again," usually around the end of the month. Now, if he'd simply been the town drunk, the ladies would have taken him under their wing, given him castoffs and free meals in exchange for a few hours of sober work hauling away junk or digging new flower beds. He'd have had enough to keep him in booze and they'd have kept him out of trouble, by and large. But Gene had the misfortune to straddle the worlds of respectable productivity and bleary-eyed senselessness. Maybe, Wally thought, it might have been better to lock Gene up from time to time. Instead he'd just taken Gene's keys and driven him home after the heavy man stumbled out of the bar at closing time. Wally always hoped that Gene would sleep it off and be sober enough to work the next day, but Gene usually got up real early looking for a hair of the dog that bit him. No telling how many "repairs" that were never needed were done, or not done right. Gene was more of a menace under the hood of a car than behind the wheel of one.

Well, he was harmless now, and off to another world. Wally figured that Gene was finding out God's considered judgment about the kind of life that he had lived. Maybe God's good wrath was stirring up this storm and giving Gene the anonymous grave he deserved. Wally silently apologized to the man upstairs, because even if he wasn't the sheriff anymore, Wally knew that he was doing the right thing by reporting this body, and he hoped that God would understand that he meant no disrespect, not leaving this in God's good hands.

Wally made his way down the beach towards the stairs. The wind was picking up and B.D. was making things difficult by running first ahead and then behind him. The dog wasn't happy that they kept going away from home, but he had faith in Wally, faith that any minute he'd change direction.

"I know, old fellow. We'll be safe enough when Bradley gets here. We'll get a ride in that nice new truck of his, you'll see."

Wally always drove an old truck. Never in his life had he bought a new one. The truth was that he'd fallen in love with his first old red Ford, the one he'd had when he was sixteen. It was about the same time that he'd fallen in love with Terry. In his heart he knew that there hadn't been a single day in the last sixty years, not a half-hour even, that he hadn't loved Terry full out.

The guys made fun of him for it. Lyle was the worst. He had married the banker's daughter, who everyone knew was a trifle balmy, but Lyle didn't seem to understand that he should be damned grateful to find any woman who would settle for a pipsqueak, a man who made the runt of the litter look like good pickings. It took Lyle fifteen years to give up his womanizing and decide to be content with his warm and, in Wally's opinion, far too understanding wife. Wally's best friend, Augie, didn't have money to attract real women, but he was so cute there was always somebody's daughter mooning over his "boyish good looks" and the ever-

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anticipated literary success that he'd enjoy just as soon as he got over being an accountant. The two men just didn't understand the value of constancy or commitment where women were concerned.

Then there was Gene, laughing at the way some men were always falling all over themselves on account of one woman or another. Wally knew it was an act, because Terry had told him how Gene had been following her around all her freshman year, and how he asked Terry to marry him and go off with him to Boston when he was accepted to some no-name college there. When she declined, Gene offered to wait till she was through high school, but she told him she was in love with someone else. Gene never went to college, and he started drinking seriously about the time that Wally and Terry were married. For years Wally had worked at not feeling sorry for the guy, but if he'd been the one who lost Terry, he'd just have slipped into the nearest grave and pulled the sod up over his head.

Wally reached the stairs and sat down to get his breath back. There it was again, a soft pain that swamped his heart and took a short trip down his arm. These days it was his secret. At first he had told the doctor when it happened, but there had been lots of talk about sticking probes into his arteries or even bypass surgery if it came to that. Not for Wally, not after watching Terry fight to keep the pain from her face and waste her precious time being the perfect patient for a bunch of strangers. Not that he'd ever said an unkind word to them or done anything but support her in those last days. It was the hardest thing he ever did. He looked out at the ocean roaring before the wind, free and full of life. When his time came, it would be a short trip to join her and he wasn't going to any hospital to make some doctor feel good about keeping the two of them apart longer.

Wally pulled out his cell phone again and checked the time. Over an hour since he had called Bradley. The young man should be here by now. Maybe he wasn't interested in meeting up with Wally. Maybe he just looked at the pictures and figured out where the body was and headed straight for it.

No sense going back down the beach against this wind now. The warm wind was picking up bits of dry sand and using them to drill at his face and hands. He buttoned up his denim jacket so that he wouldn't feel it plastering his Red Sox T-shirt to his chest, rolled up his cap and tucked it into his back pocket so it wouldn't blow away on him.

There was a path that was pretty sheltered up near the parking lot, at the top of the stairs. It ran parallel to the beach without actually leaving the trees that separated the grassy mud from the sand for most of the length of the beach. From there, he'd be able to see if Bradley had arrived at the body by another route.

Wally scraped a hole in the sand to make a bed for B.D. under the stairs, mounded the sand to protect him from the wind, and

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tied his leash to a nearby support beam. "Stay. I'll be back," he said. The wind was getting awful strong for an old dog.

The stairs felt steeper than he remembered, and Wally had to rest halfway up. He decided to risk losing the cap and wear it for a while to keep his hair from blowing into his eyes so much. At the top he came to a complete stop when he saw the sheriff's new truck parked on the far side of the otherwise empty lot.

Why park so far away from the stairs? Wally thought. Besides, if Bradley had left when Wally called and driven here and parked at the far end of the lot, he'd have found Wally at the bottom of the stairs before now and saved him the long climb. Something wasn't right.

The parking lot was one of those created by the state for tourists, and no one local used it because it was faster to park on the side of the highway and take one of the barely visible dirt paths that led directly to the beach. With the storm pending, the parking lot was empty even of tourists.

Wally looked up at the sky; clouds, but no lightning to worry about. He rested against a tree out of sight of the truck. The truck looked empty, but there was no harm in keeping a low profile.

The truck was parked into the wind. Nobody parks their vehicle into the ocean wind knowing what the wet air does to your wiring, not if he wants to drive home later. So either Bradley was in such a hurry that he didn't care, or he expected to get back in the truck pretty damn quick. So he wasn't planning on going a mile up the beach to the body. So what exactly was the truck doing here?

Wally wished he had B.D. with him. Even an old dog is some comfort when you're not sure what you're getting into. Going back for B.D. meant another trip down and then up those stairs. No, he wasn't going to do that more than he had to.

Wally unbuttoned his jacket and the holster he still wore under his right armpit as if he were still a working lawman. He'd never had to shoot it, but it was useful for putting the fear of God into anyone with a guilty conscience. He took a deep breath, ignored the effect of the adrenaline on his heart rate, and left the trees so that he was approaching the truck from the passenger side, moving into the blind spot. Then a final dash and he had the door handle in his hand and the door open. The truck looked empty.

The ringing of his cell phone rattled his teeth. Wally swung up into the truck's cab and closed the door. He waited for his hand to stop shaking before he answered it.

"Wally, I can't get there. My damn truck's in for repairs. This loaner Gene gave me has crapped out. Get your butt back here before this storm catches you."

"Bradley, you'll never guess where I'm sitting right now," Wally said, but the phone had gone dead. Silly new gadgets! To be reliable they had to be plugged into an outlet half the time. He didn't

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understand how they'd ever gotten to be so popular.

As he replaced the gun in his holster, Wally couldn't think why he hadn't guessed that it was Gene who drove the truck here. Gene was always giving nice cars a little test drive when they were in the shop. When they were all kids in high school, the gang of them took every new car in town for a "joy ride," as soon as anyone left one on the street unattended. Everyone joked about it and they didn't do any harm. That stopped when old man Turner complained to the state police. Gene got a month in the detention center. The rest of them got off with a warning, but then, Gene was the unofficial leader and everyone knew that Gene's mother wasn't about to give him the hiding that was waiting for the boys with the great good luck to have fathers.

So it was Gene who parked here. He was the one expecting to be gone just a short time and he wasn't coming back.

The first raindrops marked the windshield. It was high time he collected B.D. and got himself home. On the off-chance that the salt sea air hadn't eaten anything important yet, Wally hot-wired the truck and was rewarded by a short sputtering sound before the battery died completely. "*Ptwey* to you, too," he said, imitating the sound.

Behind the sprinkling rain, the sky was getting that green-mud look that comes before a serious storm. Better to make for the lighthouse now before the wind picked up any. Two miles to the lighthouse was quicker than the five miles home.

Wally had never been in the new sheriff's red truck before. When he handed over the reins to the youngster, he'd given him all the advice he could think to give. He'd even given him the old "extra" revolver that he had kept in the glove compartment of his old truck.

"When you're in a small department, you know there are going to be times when it's just you and the bad guy, no one else around to help out. You're the guy with the gun, but someday, some idiot's going to be tempted to try and take it away from you. That's bad because then odds are either he's shot, or you're shot, or he ends up being the guy with the gun. So what you do is, you leave another gun right there in the glove compartment and you let him see it. If he's feeling lucky, he can go for that gun. By the time he finds out there isn't any firing pin, you have the upper hand well and good." That's what he told Bradley. The question was, did Bradley listen to him?

Wally popped open the glove compartment. A bundle of money was crammed in so tightly that it didn't even fall forward when the compartment opened. Wally pulled it out, then looked deeper, feeling over the driver's manual and finding no gun. What he did find was a folded brown envelope.

Out of the corner of his eye he saw a great hairy face appear in the side window and snapped his head up. Looking closer, he recognized the nose brushing against the window and the tongue wagging under it. "Damn, B.D., you'll give me a heart attack yet," Wally said.

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The dog was standing on his back legs, paws against the door, and Wally had to open the window a bit so B.D. would hear his commanding, "Down, boy, down."

When he opened the door, Wally heard the ocean eating up new ground on the beach below. B.D. squeezed past him into the shelter of the cab. Wally held B.D. on his lap, stroking his neck and back until both their heart rates returned to normal, then made the dog move his long legs and sit in the driver's seat.

At least B.D. was safe here with him. By the sound of the waves, he'd soon have been drowned by that rising tide if Wally hadn't gotten down the stairs real quick. Lucky thing the clasp had broken on his collar. First time that had happened.

Wally patted B.D., his big hands checking for any sign that the dog had hurt himself pulling on the collar, and instead he found the collar was still there, intact. Someone had let him off the leash. Wally reached back into his holster for the gun, leaning on B.D. to hide the motion from anyone watching. Somewhere, someone was out there.

The skies ran out of patience and sent all the rain the clouds had been collecting from miles of ocean. The rain created a grey cocoon blocking Wally's view out the windows. If anyone was lying in wait for him, they were getting good and soaked now.

B.D. jumped across Wally's lap as the driver's-side door opened. Rain water sprayed them both and someone wearing a rain slicker pushed his way into the cab. In a single motion, Wally grabbed the collar of the rain slicker and pressed the gun into the neck behind it.

"Jeez, Wally, it's me. Lyle Simons."

The voice confirmed the identity of the little man. For some reason, his voice had never "broken," just remained the pure soprano of the twelve-year-old choirboy. That was weird enough back when he was a blond-haired and blue-eyed young man. Now that he was bald and bearded, new people looked around to see who else was in the room when he spoke.

Wally let go and busied himself putting his gun back in the holster. He managed it without letting Lyle see how much his hands were shaking. Then he corralled B.D. between his outstretched arms, pressing his hands hard against the dashboard and tightening every muscle in his arms, neck, and back. He concentrated on relaxing them one by one and his breathing settled down again.

"What are you doing sitting here in Bradley's new truck?" Lyle asked. He brushed his small hand over his well-kept beard, drying it out by spraying water everywhere else.

"Trying to get it started. No luck."

"Too late for that. Can't see in this rain. You'd just run yourself off the road." Lyle shook his head as if to say that Wally needed a keeper.

"What are you doing out in this weather?" Wally asked.

"Would you believe that I was sent by an angel of mercy? That

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would be my Pammie. These days, the sickness makes her almost as squirrelly as the menopause did. She was worried that you'd get caught in the storm, knowing that you walk this beach every morning early. She just went on and on about it until I said I'd come looking for you. So I got all dressed up in this silly yellow rain gear she bought for me and, sure enough, she changed her mind and said there wasn't enough time for me to be any use but I came anyway. Women!"

Wally stopped listening after he heard "not enough time for me to be any use." It reminded him of how useless he felt when Terry was dying. Now it was happening to Lyle. His wife was sick with some rare disease that hardly anyone knew how to pronounce. Terry and Pammie had been good friends and strong in so many ways. Wally always thought that they would end up widows, living together long after he and Lyle were dead and buried. Wasn't that the way it was supposed to be, the men running on ahead and leaving the women at home to clean up a few things before they came along in the second car and caught the guys having one last beer instead of setting up the campsite for the night?

"I don't think Pammie has much time left," Lyle said.

"Sorry, Lyle."

"They enrolled her in those clinical trials in Boston but I guess she didn't get the good stuff." The little man fumbled around under the rain slicker until he found a handkerchief and used it first on his bald head, then on his nose.

Wally tried to think of something to say. Lyle had the money to try everything under the sun to save Pammie. He didn't have to wonder what more money might have bought. Not like Wally, a dumb public servant scraping by on a sheriff's salary who hoped the local docs knew enough at least to make Terry comfortable at the end. Still, he felt sorry for Lyle. Sometimes it was hard to see the little bit of luck you did have.

"It was you unleashed B.D.?"

"Yep. I heard him howling and figured he'd find you for me."

B.D. looked around at the sound of his name to see what was expected of him. Wally told him to lie down and he curled up around Wally's feet.

"Last year the water came all the way up over the highway," Wally said.

The two men looked back towards the highway, noticing again how much higher it was than the parking lot. It rose above the ground on both sides. Having driven it many times, they knew that you could see the ocean to the left and to the right. If the water washed over the highway, they would be at sea for sure. It was a good truck, but it wasn't a boat and the water could pretty much cover it.

"We'd be better off at the lighthouse, if that happened," Lyle said.

Again Wally thought that the lighthouse was two miles away. He

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felt the strength of the wind pounding on the windows. He remembered how hard it had been climbing up the stairs. For the first time in his life he wished Lyle was a bigger, stronger man. As it was, the odds of his making it two miles through the rising wind were not good, alone or with Lyle by his side.

"I found Gene's body on the beach," Wally said.

"Gene? He's younger than I am. What do you suppose did him in?"

"No blood. Nothing on the outside I noticed."

"Too much booze, I'd guess."

"Another thing. Look at all this money." Wally showed Lyle where the bills were stuffed in the glove compartment.

"You know Gene was a funny guy sometimes. Like about the election."

"What do you mean? About the election?"

"I've been meaning to tell you about it. Gene paid a pile to fix that election so you'd lose. Sorry, Wally. If it wasn't for Pammie being so sick, I'd have got wind of it in time to stop him. As it was, we were in Boston and . . ."

"Don't see how his fixing the election fits into this," Wally said.

"Well, it's Bradley's truck and he's the guy who won the election. Maybe the money was a final payoff."

Wally tried to get his head around it. Bradley winning the election by buying votes outright? Using Gene to hand out the payoffs? It sounded more like something Gene would make up than something Bradley would do. More than that, it meant a lot of people on the take, and he just didn't want to believe that.

"So Bradley had the money to pay Gene."

"Maybe he just left it in the glove compartment before he left the truck at Gene's garage."

Wally felt very tired. He hadn't said anything to Lyle about Gene driving Bradley's truck here. It was something Lyle could have guessed, but more likely something he knew from having seen Gene drive it here. That sure explained why Lyle hadn't asked where Bradley was, even though they were sitting right here in Bradley's truck.

"There was a brown envelope in the glove compartment, too," Wally said. It wasn't a very strong challenge to Lyle's explanation, but rich men aren't used to any challenge at all and Wally knew it didn't take much to send them running down the very road they were trying to avoid.

"Gene was an awful bastard, Wally. I heard all about his run-in with you last Saturday. Everyone heard about his telling you that Terry ought never to have married you, that she'd be alive and kicking if she'd been his wife."

"Yep, a lot of people heard about that," Wally said, thinking that the story of Gene's outburst had spread like wildfire because it was such an odd thing. In all these years, Gene hadn't said a thing

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to anyone about Terry as far as Wally knew. If he was still angry about losing Terry he'd pretty much kept it to himself.

"What I'm saying is, maybe Gene just got what he deserved from someone who was fed up with him."

"Fed up with his mouthing off in bars?" Wally asked. "If that's enough to get a man killed, than half the men in town are in deep trouble."

"No. Fed up with his being a dangerous drunk! You know he was. You knew it all the time and you did nothing. You were the sheriff and you did nothing. So he just went on and on making money off people while he messed up their cars. His life didn't skip a beat even when he let people drive off in cars that had bad brakes that gave out on steep hills and crippled people for life."

There it was then. Twenty years ago Lyle's right-hand man was crushed in a car accident. The accident was caused by defective brakes.

"You mean like Darren's accident. What makes you think it was Gene's fault?"

"Look in the brown envelope, why don't you?"

Wally pulled the envelope out of the glove compartment, pushing the money back in while he dealt with the envelope. It held only one page, a copy of a day's repair log from Gene's Garage. It was from the day before Darren's accident. The top entry was a charge for brake repair for the only yellow Caddy in town and that had belonged to Darren.

"So Gene drove here for a short meeting with you, in a parking lot that was bound to be empty this time of year, in this weather?" Wally said. He watched Lyle thinking, chewing on his lip, realizing how far down this particular road he had gone.

The wind was shaking the cab and B.D. stuck his head up between Wally's knees looking for a sign that they were going to get out of here.

At last Lyle said, "I didn't intend to kill him. I sent him an anonymous e-mail, told him to bring all the money he could lay his hands on. Mailed him the copy of the log."

"That does explain the money. He brought a lot of it. Still, he's dead on the beach, Lyle. What happened?"

"I was an hour late showing up. It wasn't dark or light, just grey, and he'd already been drinking, so I surprised him sitting on the top of the stairs. He had a gun in his hands, Wally. The bastard was looking to shoot someone!"

"So you were looking into the barrel of a gun?" Wally said.

"I just pretended he was joking. Showed him a flask and told him I'd snuck away for a little binge on my own, wink, wink. He never for a minute thought I was the one sent him that log page."

"So you walked him down the beach to the break in the trees where you could keep an eye out in every direction, make sure no

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one saw you together?"

"No, that was his idea. He kept looking over his shoulder. Maybe he had some premonition, you know, that there was someone there who wanted to see him pay for all his sins."

"How did he die, Lyle?"

"Drinking. Let's face it. That's how he'd want to go anyways."

"Drinking what?"

"Homemade hooch. A new batch. Pretty high octane. It'd have to be to stop a heart that pickled. I didn't make him drink it! I didn't pour it down his throat!" Lyle said. There were tears in his eyes, but his lips were tight and his eyebrows were almost level.

"You brought the hooch with you, then?"

"Yes, but I'd already changed my mind about that. I decided that I'd settle for just taking the money and telling him he had to close up the garage. Then he pulled the gun and I had to pretend I was there to drink myself silly. So I pretended to take a swig or two and soon he was really belting it back like he couldn't get enough of it."

"There was no gun by the body."

"No. It's right here, Wally." Lyle pulled a gun out of his pocket, holding it in his left hand, finger on the trigger, barrel towards Wally. If he pulled the trigger he'd likely break his wrist. Lyle knew less about guns than anyone in the county, except maybe Gene.

Wally felt the wave of determination that lifted Lyle's chin. The look in his eye said he was thinking that he was a man who had done one hard thing and he was ready to do another.

"Why now? After all these years?"

"The IRS was auditing Gene. Augie was helping sort the more recent records from the old records. You know how messy Gene's filing was. Anyway, Augie spotted the entry, got a copy to me."

"You could have waited, until after Pammie . . ."

"No. I tried waiting but I was just sitting there day after day thinking about what to do about Gene instead of thinking what to do for Pammie. I wasn't going to waste any more time that way."

Wally sighed. He thought of Lyle at Pammie's bedside, wanting to run away, wanting not to watch her die, wanting to watch anyone else die.

Wally reached over and took the gun. It came away easily, old friend that it was. Somehow, he felt better, knowing that Bradley had taken his advice and kept the "extra" gun in the glove compartment of his new truck. Gene must have found it there when he was trying to stuff all that cash in there. Gene wasn't the kind of man to come up with a plan to kill someone, even a blackmailer, but given a gun right there in his hand on the morning he was going to meet a blackmailer, it must have been too tempting. Wally made a show of taking the bullets out of the gun. No need to point out the missing firing pin. He handed the empty gun back to Lyle.

"You go throw this into the ocean, so no one will be asking any

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questions about it. I'll burn the log-book page. Then we'll see if we can make it to that lighthouse."

Lyle perked up and gave Wally a hopeful little smile, took the gun, and pushed the door open against the storm.

Wally looked over the page from the logbook. There were six entries besides the one for Darren's midlife crisis on wheels. There, at the bottom of the page, was an entry that had a dozen slashes through it. That was the entry Gene thought he was being called to judgment about and it was for Terry's Chevy, in for a routine oil change. If anyone looked at the records for that month, they'd find it was in for a routine this and a routine that every damn Thursday. Wally forgave Terry when she told him about it. What else could he do? She thought he was carrying on with some waitress in the next town and she was angry with him. It was Gene who told her about that waitress and he was lying as usual. Gene was playing on Terry's insecurity but he forgot that she really loved Wally too much to let it go on long.

All these years Gene must have been waiting for Wally to punish him for that month. Wally tried to look at it from Gene's point of view. Terry was gone. Wally wasn't even sheriff anymore and so maybe he had nothing left to lose. Then there was the log with Terry's appointment arriving in his mailbox, followed by an e-mail demanding a meeting in this out of the way place not far from where Wally walked every morning. That Wally was after him was certainly more likely than that Lyle had grown a backbone at this time of life.

Wally tore the log page into little pieces and burned them, one piece at a time, in the ashtray. Maybe if he had run Gene out of town Lyle would be sitting at home next to his wife, waiting for that final breath and hoping she couldn't see how frightened he was of dying alone someday after she was gone.

When the page was gone, Wally closed the glove compartment on the bundle of money and waited for Lyle to come back. Of course, Lyle didn't have to come back. He could just head out for the lighthouse on his own and leave Wally to the storm, if he had a mind to do that.

All in all there was not much chance that the storm would bring the ocean up over the truck. Wally's own odds were better just staying where he was until it blew over. He thought it through, slowly. He and Lyle sitting in the truck until it was safe to leave, going back to town. Then what? Both of them knowing about the hooch, waiting for the other to tell. Lyle trying not to think about it and eventually unburdening his soul. The search through Gene's records, the inevitable discovery of the odd pattern of Terry's repairs that month. Bradley asking questions, secrets guessed at.

The wind was bending the trees in two. They were young and, like rubber, they folded easily. It was going to be a very big blow.

Wally patted his knee and B.D. climbed up on his lap.

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"Sorry, old boy. We're going to take our chances with the storm. Just as soon as Lyle gets back, we'll head out for the lighthouse. Then we'll all just leave this one in God's good hands."

They found two bodies the next day, when the storm had blown itself out. Wally and Lyle hadn't made it to the lighthouse, but they had held on to each other somehow and together they were wedged into the branches of the only really big tree for miles around. B.D. fared better. He dragged himself into town two days later. There was no sign of Gene's body, but the pictures that Wally had sent told the story well enough. There was even that flask, just visible, under his right hand. No surprises there.

A week later, they pulled Bradley's red truck out of the ditch where the ocean had deposited it. It was full of silt and battered beyond repair, but still in one piece. More than one of the old-timers, who missed Wally and Lyle, shook their heads and thought, what if the two men had found and taken shelter in that truck? A wild ride, but any that had been through storms before figured the two of them would be alive to tell the tale.

Bradley sat in his truck for one last time, amazed at how well it had held together. He even reached over and pried open the glove compartment to retrieve that "extra" gun Wally had given him. It wasn't there. Instead, he found the money. He just sat there and looked at it. The last time he saw that stack was about a week before the storm when he gave it to Gene as payment for the rigged election.

Bradley told them to haul the totaled truck to the salvage lot. He stood in the sunshine, the money safe in his pocket. It was as if he'd really won fair and square, and who knew, maybe he had. It was Gene who approached him, Gene with the plan to entice a few old-timers to vote for Bradley. In a way, it was more of a threat than an offer. If he hadn't agreed, for sure Gene was going to sabotage him with those same old-timers.

Now, with the money back in his pocket, it felt like it had never really happened at all. As he thought about it, Bradley decided that Gene was just looking for a way to get some drinking money. After all, it was hard to imagine Gene paying out good money for votes. By the time the truck was out of sight, Bradley couldn't even imagine why he'd bought Gene's story in the first place.

Well, the money would go into a new truck. For the first time in a long time, Bradley felt confident that he'd be the man he once set out to be and a better sheriff than folks deserved. It was a nice feeling, like he'd been given another chance.

The new sheriff was not a religious man, so he contented himself with the observation that it's an ill wind that blows no man good and he never thought back on that storm without feeling thankful for it. ●

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The Peahen

by Twist Phelan

The peahen appeared in Dex's barn the same day he had trouble with the tractor. It was there when he came back from scraping the driveway. The gravel was always rutted and uneven after a winter under the snowplow. So every year, three weeks after the last melt, Dex ran the scraper over it. He liked how a farmer's life was regular that way.

Dex knew what kind of bird it was because he'd seen a picture at the library. Not that Dex was a reader. It was August, and there were three patrons ahead of Maeve in the checkout line, and the library was air-conditioned. Dex had flipped through a book that had been left out on a table so the librarian wouldn't ask him to leave. The book had thick pages, and photos, all of birds.

The Peterses only needed one car. Dex drove Maeve on her errands—to the market, to the doctor, and, once a week, to the library. He had never liked the idea of her alone in town.

The book said a peahen was a female peacock. That didn't make sense to Dex. It was like saying a doe was a female buck, instead of a female deer. There had to be a word that applied to both. Otherwise what was a peacock? A male peahen?

The peahen in the barn was a dull green. At least it would have been dull on a peacock. For a peahen, it was probably average. Could even be spectacular, for all Dex knew. The book hadn't said anything about that.

Maeve hadn't been one for bright colors. At least that's what Dex had thought. But then she'd started wearing that scarf. Red and purple twined around, colors that raised his pulse just looking at them. The store in town didn't sell anything like it.

Dex noticed the peahen when he was maneuvering the tractor

"'The Peahen' is an homage to Peter Dexter," Twist Phelan told *EQMM*. "In the 1970s and '80s, before he earned acclaim for his novels *Paris Trout* and *Deadwood*, Dexter was a newspaper columnist. Every week, in a few hundred words, he cut to the heart of the American character. . . . My story is based on one of those columns, which looks at the tension that arises from the influx of things foreign on all-American endeavors."

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into the barn (tricky with the scraper attached on the front). While it was the first exotic bird ever to wander onto his property, Dex wasn't in the frame of mind to appreciate it. His barn and house sat on a slight rise. When he was driving up the incline, the tractor had started making that horrible racket.

The noise upset Dex. He needed the tractor to plow his acreage, plant his seed, harvest his crops. A farmer's whole life depended on his tractor.

The tractor hadn't been all that quiet to begin with. Even before the noise started, it was so loud, Dex had trouble hearing anything else when he was driving it. Not birds, not the occasional car down the dirt road, not a person walking to the farm next-door.

It seemed to Dex that the noise meant big trouble. The engine, like the rest of the tractor, was Italian, as notoriously temperamental as those people.

And it wasn't just the noise. The tractor was a Bendorini, a company that had gone into bankruptcy right after Dex bought the tractor. Another company had bought the name and liabilities. The closest authorized dealership was in Boise.

Dex didn't live in Boise. He lived in Stanley, a small mountain town almost four hours away. By car. It would take longer if he had to go by tractor.

Not that he expected it would help if he did get there. Dex was pretty sure the dealer wouldn't repair the tractor, at least not without charging him. That's because he'd bought the tractor secondhand from his neighbor, Victor Rossi. A used tractor was like a used car. Buy a Bendorini from Victor Rossi, and you had to go back to Victor if there was a problem. Unless Victor had printed *As Is* on the bottom of the bill of sale. And Victor had.

Dex suspected the problem was either in the engine or the transmission—a flaw in the heart of the machine. The noise—a human-like scream of pain or pleasure—had occurred half a dozen times as he climbed the hill to the barn. Dex never wanted to hear that sort of noise again.

Dex drove his Italian Chapter 11 tractor to the rear of the barn. He killed the engine—with a Bendorini, you didn't turn a key, you pulled a lever that strangled it. He popped the hood and touched a piece of metal and burned himself. While he held his reddened fingers under cold water, he thought about how things might have been different if he'd bought a John Deere like everybody else.

John Deere was American through and through. No parts from China, no Mexicans putting it together. The company had been founded in Illinois by a blacksmith turned plow-maker nearly two hundred years ago. Dex had worn the company's kelly-green trucker hats all through high school.

The Bendorini was red. Dex remembered the first time he saw it. It had been last fall, the second week of October. Victor was sitting

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on the tractor, parked beside the road where his property adjoined Dex's. Maeve was there, too. Every day except Sunday she walked down the dusty track to check their mailbox, even though there were usually only bills, and those arrived toward the end of the month. Later, Dex would find out Maeve walked other places, too.

His wife had her head tilted back, her hand raised to shield her eyes from the sun. While Dex watched, Victor said something to her, they both laughed, then Maeve walked back up the driveway. Right then, Dex decided he wanted a Bendorini.

"I'm buying a Bendorini," he'd told Maeve that night when she was putting away the laundry. He liked how she folded his T-shirts so they lined up like kernels of corn in his drawer.

A new tractor cost sixty thousand dollars. Dex didn't have sixty thousand dollars. Neither did the bank, at least not to lend to him. So Dex had walked down the driveway and bought the Bendorini from Victor for a little cash, plus an acre of plum trees Victor said he'd had his eye on. Dex's father had planted the trees when he bought the farm fifty-nine years ago. Maeve used to make jam from the fruit.

While Dex ran his hand under the faucet, his eyes adjusted to the dim light in the barn. The peahen had moved to the corner.

If she was bothered by the noise of the tractor—it had stopped screaming now that it wasn't climbing hills—she didn't show it. She stared at Dex. He stared at her.

Dex walked over to see what the peahen thought she was doing in his barn. While she wasn't exactly friendly, she did sidle over so he could see what she was looking at. They both stared at the washing machine.

When their old dryer had given out and they had to buy a new one, Maeve asked if they could get the matching washing machine, too. Dex had put the old washer in the barn. Maeve had used it to wash his overalls and rags and other really dirty stuff. But even on the Sanitize setting, it couldn't get all the stains out. Dex had to burn the shirt and pants he'd been wearing two weeks ago.

Dex put some rags into the washer, added detergent, and pressed the On/Off button. The light above the button changed from green to red as the washer filled with water. He and the peahen stood there for a while, enjoying the On/Off light. When Dex began to imagine them as a married couple watching the sunset, he realized it was time to go back and look at the tractor.

The peahen stayed where she was. Dex admired her for knowing what she liked and sticking with it. People should be as constant.

He got out his toolbox and looked for his favorite wrench for a few minutes—the big one with the oversized head—before he remembered he didn't have it anymore. So he took out another wrench and tried to tighten a bolt.

The wrench didn't fit. Dex went through two more wrenches before he realized the bolts were metric, and he didn't have metric

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wrenches. So he went inside and called the dealership in Boise. They referred him to the regional distributorship in Salt Lake, who gave him a number to call in Los Angeles.

Dex called the number. It was either the company that had bought Bendorini out of bankruptcy or a law firm, he wasn't sure. By that time he was using bad language, language so bad that he felt he should call up his best friend Tommy DeFillipi to apologize for what he'd been saying about Italians. But it had been awhile since he and Tommy had been in touch.

Before he hung up on Dex, the person in Los Angeles suggested the problem might be the tension in the belt. Having no one else to call, Dex went back to the barn to check.

The peahen didn't move as he walked past. She was completely involved in the washer light.

Dex reached under the tractor. This time he didn't burn himself because the metal was cool. He fingered the belt that connected the engine to the mower part. It felt all right, but it was hard to tell for sure. Things that he thought should be within his grasp weren't always. He tried again, then gave up. Dex figured some people were born to fix certain things, and some weren't. It was like being born Italian. Either you were, or you weren't.

He thought some more, then decided that if he sharpened the scraper, it wouldn't have been a wasted afternoon. So he got out a pair of pliers—his wrenches were still useless—unfastened the scraper deck, and slid it out from underneath the tractor.

It weighed about a hundred and thirty pounds. Dex distinctly remembered Victor telling him how easy it would be to take off the deck for sharpening. A couple of bolts, a couple of linchpins, and that was it. Victor hadn't mentioned how hard it was to maneuver a hundred and thirty pounds. Dex had found this out for himself two weeks ago.

Dex sharpened the scraper blade, caressing the edge with the file, doing it more gently than he usually would. When he was finished, he decided to put the scraper back on. An hour later, sweaty, arms shaking, he finally got one of the linchpins in place. After that, it was easy to reassemble everything else. He'd found nothing that might explain the scream. He had bashed his right hand, though, the one he'd used to swing the big wrench with the oversized head.

After putting away the file, Dex went to the barn entrance. He pressed his palms against his aching back, looked toward his neighbor's farm. Victor's place was much larger than Dex's. Next to the silo was a green tractor. Beyond was five thousand acres of soybeans. Dex had twelve hundred acres of corn.

Soy was a more profitable crop than corn. Easier to grow, too. But Dex's father had served in the Pacific. "I'm not growing Jap food," he had told the seed company rep. Dex could see his point. Three months ago, when Maeve started making the new red sauce, he

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had stopped eating spaghetti.

It would take Dex twenty minutes to walk down his driveway, along the road, then up Victor's driveway to the big house in the trees. A trail cut behind Dex's barn in the direction of Victor's place, but Dex had never used it. New grass was sprouting in the track. Soon the trail would be overgrown. Lifting the keys from the peg by the door, Dex got into his pickup.

Victor's eyes narrowed when he saw Dex standing on his porch. He didn't ask him in, but instead talked to him through the screen door. Victor lived alone. From what Dex could see through the screen, his house was tidier than Dex's. Not as nice as Maeve would have kept it. But close. Dex wished his house was tidy again.

Dex explained about the disturbing tractor noises. Victor started shaking his head before he finished.

"I sold that tractor to you as is," he said.

Dex was tempted to use bad language again, but didn't. Instead he asked Victor if he wouldn't mind taking a look at the tractor. Maybe because he used to own it he would know what was wrong with it.

"You got any metric wrenches?" Dex said.

Dex drove them back to his place. He saw Victor glance at the side yard of the house as they passed, where Maeve used to hang the bed sheets on the clothesline. She said they smelled better when they were air-dried. Dex wondered if that was true, why she didn't dry everything that way. They wouldn't have needed a new dryer. Or a washer, either.

"Maeve still at her sister's?" Victor said, breaking the silence that had descended when they got into the truck. His voice was slightly accented.

Dex grunted. He parked the truck and led the way into the barn.

"What the hell?" Victor eyed the peahen.

"She likes looking at the washing machine." Dex said.

"It's a peafowl." Victor took out his cell phone.

Peafowl. Leave it to Victor to know the word. Dex started the tractor. Victor scowled, pressed the phone against his ear, and kept talking. Dex let the tractor run.

Victor closed the phone. "Sounds fine to me."

Dex grunted and lifted the hood.

Victor looked over the engine without touching it.

"Looks fine to me."

Dex felt a rush of anger. The tractor, Dex, nothing was fine. They'd never be fine again, and Victor knew it. Dex picked up the biggest of Victor's metric wrenches and pointed.

"What about that part there?"

Victor leaned over to see what Dex was pointing at. The wrench hit the base of Victor's skull with a dull thud that Dex felt in his stomach.

The peahen never looked away from the washing machine.

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Dex set down the metric wrench. It had worked just as well as his big one with the oversized head.

He rolled Victor's body into a tarp, then hoisted it onto the scraper attachment. Pain shot through his lower back. The muscles were still sore from lifting Maeve.

Dex put a sack of lime on top of the rolled-up tarp. He'd have to buy more in Boise. Already he'd picked up the season's order from the hardware in town.

The sun shone through the barn door. Dust motes swirled. Two hours left in the farming day. Dex climbed onto the tractor. At least the ground wouldn't be near-frozen this time.

He drove the tractor out of the barn. The peahen didn't flinch.

It was almost dark when Dex drove the tractor back up the hill. No shriek. Maybe everything was fixed now.

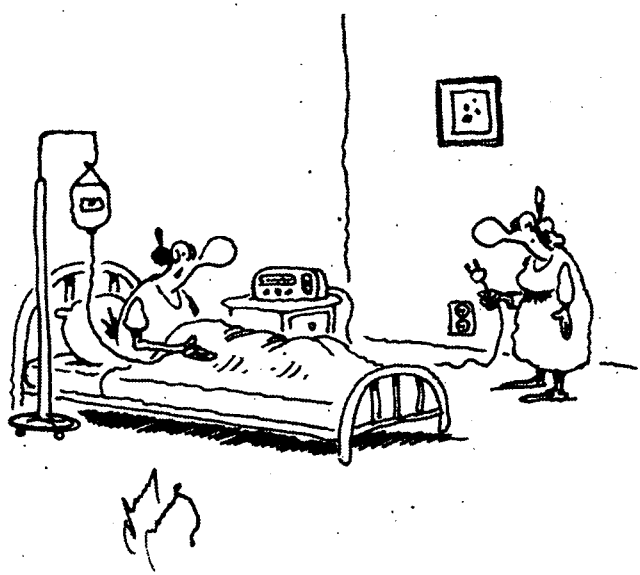
Dex climbed off the tractor. He noticed the peahen still standing in front of the washer, staring at the red light.

"Show's over," Dex said. He punched the On/Off button. The red light went off.

The bird stared at Dex as though she couldn't believe what he had done. As Dex headed into the house to strip off his clothes and burn them, the peahen opened her beak and the air shattered and Dex understood in that moment that the noise had not come from the tractor.

A car bumped up the driveway. A sheriff's deputy leaned his head out the window. He wore a baseball cap that said *Animal Control* across the front.

"Hey, Mr. Peters," he said. "Got a call about a peahen. Do you know where I can find Victor Rossi?" ●



"That's the radio, Allison, but I caught the symbolism."

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The Rock

by Edward D. Hoch

Here, for the first time in print in the U. S., is a story Edward D. Hoch wrote for the British anthology *I.D.: Crimes of Identity* (edited by Martin Edwards) in 2006. Readers in search of more new Hoch stories should look for a copy of *Sherlock Holmes Mystery Magazine,* which contains the new Hoch tale "The Automaton Museum." Next month we'll be featuring the last story the great short-story writer worked on, completed by Jon L. Breen. †

Linda O'Toole had been in Gibraltar only a few hours when a rumpled little man stopped her in the lobby of the Rock Hotel and asked, "Pardon me, but are you Laura Nostrum?"

"That's right," she agreed. "Can I help you?"

"I'm Liam Fitzhugh with the London *Daily Mail*. Do you have any comment on the Internet news story stating that you're an undercover agent for the Central Intelligence Agency?"

Linda gave him her brightest smile. "I can't imagine what you're talking about. I'm here representing Osage Investment Corporation at the Casino Conference."

"Then you deny any involvement with the CIA?"

"I certainly do. If you'll excuse me now, I have a meeting to attend." When he showed no interest in stepping aside, she walked around him and out of the hotel.

Gibraltar, a slender peninsula extending south from Spain and separated from it by a kilometer-wide neutral zone, might have seemed an odd venue for the first worldwide casino conference, but among the attending nations it seemed both centrally located and relatively independent of foreign influence. True, Gibraltar was an overseas territory of the United Kingdom, but "overseas" was the operative word. Its reputation as an international conference center was well earned. This was not the same as having such a conference in London or Las Vegas or Monaco, where the influence of local casinos could well control the agenda. Gibraltar had only two land-based casinos, both quite a bit smaller than the average American ones, and both located on Europa Road. One was in the

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Rock Hotel where Linda was staying, a long white multi-story building that blended well with its surrounding gardens.

At the nearby theater where the meeting was taking place she stopped at the registration desk and identified herself as Laura Nostrum. The ID badge was waiting for her. She pinned it on her jacket and started into the auditorium, then changed her mind and headed for the ladies' room instead. Inside one of the stalls she took out her cell phone and punched in a familiar number in a Paris suburb. When the connection was made she didn't speak but merely punched in another series of numbers. She received an answering beep, closed her cell phone, and left the room.

Back at the theater, the first man she met was a bearded Frenchman named Pierre Zele. He carried an ivory-knobbed cane, leaned down for a better look at her ID badge, and introduced himself. "I am here on behalf of the casino at Monte Carlo," he told her, "and I am president of our association this year. I trust this little conference I helped organize can accomplish something, Miss Nostrum."

"Please call me Laura. I represent Osage Investments."

"They are one of your Native American tribes. No?"

"Well, there is an Osage tribe, but we have no connection with them. We have a proposal to make regarding the investment of casino profits. I'll be addressing your conference tomorrow morning."

Pierre Zele eyed her with new interest, studying her ID badge as if to memorize the name. She wondered if he had seen the Internet report the *Daily Mail* reporter had mentioned. "I will be listening with interest," he promised, and turned away.

The afternoon sessions were under way when she entered the theater, but progressing slowly as remarks were translated into English and French. After some thirty minutes she exited, along with a slender young man whose nametag read *Michael Patrick, Ireland.*

"Gets a bit boring, doesn't it, sitting through those translations?" he observed as they reached the outer lobby. "They should use simultaneous translators like the UN."

"That would be more expensive," she told him, glancing again at his nametag. "You're Irish."

"Guilty. Since we both ducked out of there together, could I buy you a drink at the hotel bar?"

"Sure, why not?"

They walked around the corner and up the hill to the Rock Hotel. Though the main casino didn't open until nine in the evening, the slot machines were in operation from noon on. Their familiar clanging could be heard even in the hotel's cocktail lounge. "Is this your first trip to Gibraltar?" he asked after they'd ordered whiskey and water.

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"It is. I'm anxious to see the apes."

Michael Patrick smiled at her. "They're actually tailless monkeys known as Barbary Macaques. British sailors brought the first ones here after the Royal Navy captured the stronghold in seventeen oh-four. There are more than a hundred and sixty now, each one named at birth, but they almost died out during World War Two and Churchill famously took steps to insure their survival. Tradition had it that when the apes were gone, the British would be gone too."

"You know a great deal," she said, sipping her whiskey. "Apes or monkeys, I'd like to see them."

"That's easily arranged. They're in two areas. The best for viewing is the Apes' Den at Queen's Gate, right up the hill behind this hotel. And surely you'll want to view the Rock itself from the observation deck. We can reach it by cable car. I'd be pleased to give you a tour tomorrow."

She shook her head. "I have to read a paper at the morning session."

"Perhaps later, then."

"I thought casinos were still illegal in Ireland. What brings you here?"

"Commercial casinos are illegal, but there are a number of private members' clubs throughout the country. We have seven in Dublin alone. I manage one of the smaller ones." He passed her his card, with a lucky clover embossed in green. "If you're ever up that way, come see our place. I'll get you members' privileges."

"Thank you, kind sir," she said, tucking the card away in her purse. Glancing toward the bar, she spotted the British journalist, Liam Fitzhugh, eyeing her. Time to move on, she decided. "And thanks for the drink. I have to go now."

Later that evening, after the full casino was in operation, she wandered in and spent some time at the roulette wheel. It was American-style roulette, with both the zero and double zero. She noticed the Frenchman, Zele, avoiding the table.

"Are you enjoying yourself, mademoiselle?" a handsome foreign gentleman asked after she'd won on three spins in a row.

"I am indeed, but I'm no mademoiselle. I'm American."

"Ah, yes!" He glanced at her ID badge, which she'd neglected to remove. "Laura Nostrum, I am Bert Stein."

"German?"

He smiled. "Born there, but I've lived in Spain for thirty years."

"Are you attending the casino conference?"

"Yes," he replied, remembering to take the ID badge from his pocket. "It is a good excuse to visit the Rock, which should belong to Spain."

"You want Gibraltar back?"

"Most certainly," he said with conviction. "It is the most famous rock in the world, even more famous than Ayers Rock in Australia.

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There have been referendums from time to time, but always the people vote to remain a British dependency."

She placed a few chips on the red and lost. "I guess my luck just changed. I'd better quit while I'm ahead."

"If you'd like a tour of the Rock—"

"Thanks. I've already had an offer."

In the morning the theater was filled as the casino session got under way in earnest. Pierre Zele said a few words by way of introduction, and then it was Linda's turn. She came directly to the point. "I'm here on behalf of Osage Investments, a small international company with big plans. It seemed fitting that this first casino conference be held here in Gibraltar, where we can actually look across from the rock to the poorest continent, just thirteen kilometers away. Africa needs our help. It needs our money. There can be no better use for the billions of dollars and pounds and euros that would otherwise be reinvested in newer and larger casinos."

She went on from there, making a passionate case, but already she was aware of some eyes glazing over, some hands discreetly hiding a morning yawn. This was not what they'd come to hear, at least not from Laura Nostrum. After her talk there was a scattering of polite applause and already the next speaker was being announced. Pierre Zele met her on the way out. "Miss Nostrum, that was an interesting talk, but not the subject we expected."

"I decided to change the subject," she told him.

"Has your agency shifted its priority to Africa?" he asked, with a shade of emphasis on the word agency.

"Osage Investments has several priorities."

She continued on her way, walking around the corner to the wooded botanical gardens across the street from her hotel. Seated near the statue of the Duke of Wellington, she smoked a cigarette and watched the spray from a nearby fountain. A blond woman about her own age was strolling nearby, carrying a black tote bag that might have contained a laptop computer. Linda ground out her cigarette and started walking again, west toward the bay. When she reached Rosia Road she turned south, heading for the harbor and dock area. She reached a building called Jumper's Bastion and paused as the blond woman came up to her.

"Are you thinking of jumping?" she asked Linda.

"What? You startled me!"

"It's not an invitation to suicides. It was named after Captain Jumper, the first British officer to land on Gibraltar."

"Interesting," Linda said, avoiding the woman's eyes.

"This is one of the best harbors around." Her casual tone suddenly disappeared and she asked, "Who are you?"

"What?" Linda pointed to the badge still pinned to her jacket. "Laura Nostrum."

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The woman shook her head, almost sadly. "No, you're not. I'm Laura Nostrum. I believe your name is Linda O'Toole, since that was the only ID badge left unclaimed this morning."

"Maybe I picked up the wrong one."

"Maybe you did. Are you a reporter?"

Linda almost laughed at the idea. "No. I'm representing Osage Investments. We're trying to funnel investment money into Africa to help the economy there."

"What made you think you could use my identity?"

She sighed and tried to explain. "I saw on the convention schedule that you were speaking this morning in a prime time slot. That reporter Fitzhugh asked if I was Laura Nostrum and I just said yes. When he mentioned the CIA connection and I saw your ID badge was unclaimed I figured you'd canceled because of the press. So I just said I was you and spoke in your place."

Laura Nostrum studied her with steely eyes. "Your explanation is hard to accept. You told that reporter you were me before he mentioned the CIA. Why would you do that unless you were already planning to impersonate me?"

"I saw the item on the Internet, too. The reporter's mistake gave me an opportunity to switch identities."

"You felt safer being mistaken for a CIA agent than being plain Linda O'Toole?" When Linda didn't answer she continued. "That reporter, Liam Fitzhugh, was murdered early this morning, stabbed to death in the gardens across from our hotel."

"Oh no!"

"Yes. And the police seem to think Laura Nostrum might have killed him for spreading the news of her identity."

It was true. Fitzhugh had left the casino when it closed at four A.M. and someone had stabbed him along the Europa Road near the gardens. His wallet was untouched. As she listened to Nostrum relate the events, Linda felt a stab of fear not unlike the blade that must have ended Fitzhugh's life. "Did you kill him?" she asked.

"I had nothing to do with his death. I represent an international on-line casino company. That's all you need to know. The only reason I contacted you at all was to warn you. If people believe you're me, your life could be in danger."

"Why is the CIA interested in casinos anyway?" Linda wanted to know. "Is this some American scheme to balance the budget?"

Linda Nostrum was not amused. She glanced around and motioned toward a nearby cafe with sidewalk tables. "Let's have a drink and we'll talk some more."

They ordered a couple of Tuskers, an African beer whose popularity had spread across the Strait, and Nostrum leaned her tote bag against the table leg between them. It was Linda's first chance to study the other woman and she saw a slender frame with an

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attractive face and blond hair pulled back and knotted behind her head. She was a bit taller than Linda, and her face was dead serious as she spoke. "First of all, forget about the CIA. If I did have a connection with them I couldn't reveal it."

"All right."

"Just what did Liam Fitzhugh say to you?"

"He asked me if my name was Laura Nostrum. I suppose we're about the same age and coloring. I saw my opportunity and said yes. Then he mentioned something that was on the Internet about my being with the CIA. I wasn't the one he wanted so I just denied it and walked on."

"But you picked up my ID badge. Do you have any idea what this is all about?"

"No," Linda admitted.

The woman opposite lowered her voice, though there was no one close enough to overhear their conversation. "Do you realize how much money is skimmed off the top of casino profits each year? There was a time decades ago when the money from Las Vegas helped support organized crime. Today, with so many nations involved, it's difficult to determine where some of those casino profits go. I planned to address the issue in my talk, to warn that some of it might be funneled to terrorist organizations."

"Then maybe I did some good suggesting it go to the African—" She stopped suddenly as a Gibraltar Police car pulled up at the curb.

Two officers got out and the driver asked, "Are you Laura Nostrum?"

Both women exchanged glances and the real Laura Nostrum stood up. "That's me. What can I do for you?"

"We'd like you to accompany us to the station," he told her. "It's concerning the death of Mr. Liam Fitzhugh."

"I know nothing about that."

"We only wish to question you and take a statement."

"Very well." She glanced back at Linda, as if to convey some message. Then she climbed into the backseat of the patrol car with one of the officers.

Linda watched the car disappear down Rosia Road. It was only then that she realized the black tote bag still rested against the leg of their table. She picked it up and started back to the hotel. When she reached the lobby she knew the news of the reporter's killing was spreading. It was the German Spaniard from the casino who intercepted her on the way to the elevator.

"Miss Nostrum, are you all right? We heard that the reporter Fitzhugh was killed in the gardens. They say it was because he revealed your identity."

"I—that's not true. You see, I'm not Miss Nostrum. It was all a terrible mistake."

Bert Stein frowned at her words. "What do you mean?"

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"My name is Linda O'Toole. The police have picked up the real Laura Nostrum for questioning."

"That is bad. The police do not like interference from the CIA."

"They're British police, not Spaniards," she reminded him.

He shrugged. "Police are police. Be careful, Miss O'Toole, if that is your name."

As she made her way to her room she knew what she must do next.

Once in the safety of her room she opened the tote bag, revealing the laptop computer she'd expected. But when she raised the lid there was a surprise, a sticker that read: *Property of the London Daily Mail.* It was the dead man's computer. She took a deep breath, wondering if Laura had killed him for it. She scrolled down the e-mail list of sent items and opened the last message, addressed to someone at the paper, most likely his editor. Skimming down the screen she saw Nostrum's name and read: *Nostrum was observed speaking with a man I suspect is channeling casino profits to terrorist organizations. I am keeping an eye on the Rock.*

She stared at the screen, trying to understand the words. At the time Liam Fitzhugh sent this e-mail, he still believed she was Laura Nostrum, the purported CIA agent. And she'd noticed him nearby once or twice when she was speaking with someone. But what men had she spoken with prior to his murder? She made a quick list in her head and came up with only three: Pierre Zele, the conference organizer; the Irishman Mike Patrick; and Bert Stein from Spain. Patrick had offered to show her the Rock apes and take the cable car to the Rock's observation deck. Was that why Fitzhugh had wanted to keep an eye on it?

When there was still no word that Laura Nostrum had been freed by the police, she sought out Pierre Zele and asked if he'd heard anything. "Only that they're holding her," he said, standing outside the theater, where a film on casinos in the Far East was being shown to delegates. "It's best not to ask too many questions."

"But she was on your program as a speaker!"

His eyebrows rose a fraction. "You're forgetting, Miss Nostrum did speak to us, just this morning."

"I . . . I shouldn't have used her name. I thought I was doing it for a good cause."

"You're still wearing her badge."

"She must have mine. When I see her we'll have to exchange them. I'm Linda O'Toole."

"I see."

She hurried away, regretting that she'd approached him at all.

Back at the hotel casino, Mike Patrick caught up with her. At that moment, despite her suspicions, his friendly face was a relief. "How about that trip to see the Rock apes?"

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She hesitated only a moment. "Why not?"

"I've got a rental car. We can drive through. It's the best way to see them. They climb all over the cars."

"Sounds exciting," she replied with only a touch of irony.

The car was an older model that looked as if it had visited ape country before. As they started up the road toward Queen's Gate, Mike Patrick remarked casually, "The word around the conference is that you're not Laura Nostrum at all."

She laughed. "There was a bit of a mix-up. I'm just a poor Irish girl named Linda O'Toole."

"I thought you were American."

"I am, but I work at my firm's Paris office now."

"And they are . . . ?"

"Osage Investments."

He grunted. Ahead of them she saw the Apes' Den, and an officer stopped them with a few words of warning. "Stay inside the vehicle at all times and do not touch the apes. They do like to bite people. We're not responsible for injuries to yourself or your vehicle."

They continued down the road, watching the hillside for movement. "There's one!" Linda exclaimed, pointing to a tailless monkey about two feet tall that had suddenly come running down from the trees.

Within minutes there were three Barbary Macaques on the car, one of them effectively blocking Mike's view through the windshield. He kept driving slowly. "They want food, I suppose. Here's a bag of berries. Throw them a few, but don't let them bite you."

She opened the window far enough to toss some berries, and by that time two more cars had appeared behind them. One of the macaques grabbed a berry while the other two jumped off, heading for the new arrivals. "This is a popular place," Linda said.

"In the busy season they have a thousand visitors a day here."

"I can tell this isn't your first trip."

He increased their speed as more apes headed for the car. "I was here once before, a couple of years back."

By then it was late afternoon, but Mike insisted they must take the cable car to the observation platform on the Rock. When they reached it, crowded in among some French and Spanish tourists, Linda had to admit it was a magnificent sight. "Is that Africa over there?" she asked.

"It certainly is. Those are the Rif Mountains you're looking at. It's Morocco, the country of Tangier, Marrakesh, Casablanca, and a thousand intrigues, only a few of them captured in the cinema. We could take the ferry across tomorrow if you have time."

She gave her familiar laugh. "There are enough intrigues right here on Gibraltar. This has been pleasant, but I'd better be getting back. I'm anxious to learn if the police have released Miss Nostrum."

Bert Stein was the first person she saw in the hotel lobby. It was he

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who told her the news. "The police have released that woman, Laura Nostrum. The word is there was pressure from Washington and the Prime Minister ordered it. If the Spanish were in control, it wouldn't be like that."

"Is she back here?"

Stein shook his head. "Zele says they're flying her to London on the first available plane."

She glanced at her watch, wondering about the schedule. Gibraltar's airfield was at the north end of the peninsula, almost to the Spanish neutral zone, but it was barely more than two miles from the hotel. She hurried up to her room to get the laptop and then went out to the street where a few taxis were waiting. The airfield, jutting into the bay to allow the necessary length for takeoffs and landings, was located just beyond Gibraltar's sports stadium. She was there within minutes, just as the setting sun was dipping into the bay, and she only hoped it wasn't too late. A Gibraltar police car was parked in front of the terminal, which was a good sign.

"When's the next London flight?" she asked the ticket seller.

"British Airways has a delayed flight to Gatwick boarding in twenty minutes."

"I have to see someone waiting to board."

The young woman stared at her. "You can't pass through security without a boarding pass."

Linda turned to see Laura Nostrum being escorted through security by a police officer. "Laura!" she called out. "Wait up!"

The blond woman turned and recognized her at once. She shook off the officer's arm and came forward to meet her. "What are you doing here?" she asked.

"I thought you'd want this laptop. Can I speak with you in private before you take off?"

"I only have fifteen minutes." She glanced at the officer. "The police are convinced I killed Fitzhugh because he blew my cover. If they see that computer, they'll be sure of it. They only released me on condition that I leave Gibraltar at once."

Linda glanced around. "Do they have a private office we could use?"

"This is as private as it gets. Who are you, anyway?"

Linda took a deep breath. It was time for the truth. "Interpol. I'm stationed at their Paris headquarters. We're both after the same person, the one who's diverting casino profits to terrorists. I think I know who it is, but I need you to confirm it. Washington wouldn't have sent you here unless they were suspicious of someone at the conference."

"I'm sorry. I can't tell you a thing."

Linda was aware that someone else had entered the terminal building behind her, but she ignored it until she saw the startled expression on Laura's face. "He's got a gun!"

There were two shots close together as Laura pushed her to the

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floor. Then she realized the police officer had fired back. "Stay down!" the officer warned them as he made his way carefully to the wounded man. Already the ticket agent was calling for help on her phone.

Their assailant was still alive, but bleeding badly. "Who is this man?" Laura Nostrum asked as they ignored the officer and got to their feet.

"He's the one we're both looking for," Linda told her, "and I'm pretty sure he's Liam Fitzhugh's killer. His name is Bert Stein."

The flight to London departed without Laura Nostrum. There were police reports to be filled out, and a trip back to the station for them both. The investigating detective was Lieutenant Collins and he let them know that Stein would probably live. "He might even be willing to implicate others in his skimming operation, if we're lucky. I assume that's the goal of both Interpol and the CIA. Now suppose you tell me about Fitzhugh's computer, Miss O'Toole."

"Laura left it by our table when the police took her in for questioning this morning, obviously because if you found it in her possession you'd think she killed the reporter to obtain it."

Collins nodded. "We certainly would have. How did it come into your possession, Miss Nostrum?"

She shrugged. "As soon as I heard he'd been killed I went to his room, found it, and removed it."

"Did you have a key?"

"Not an official one."

Lieutenant Collins grunted. "We'll let that pass." He turned back to Linda. "Go on, Miss O'Toole."

"I read Fitzhugh's last e-mail to his London paper. He said he'd observed Nostrum—the name I was using at the time—speaking with the man he suspected of aiding the terrorists. I'd only spoken to three men since I'd arrived—Pierre Zele, Mike Patrick, and Bert Stein. Fitzhugh went on to say he'd be keeping a close eye on the Rock. Did he mean the Rock of Gibraltar? Hardly! Since he was already on the Rock, how could he help but keep an eye on it? His sentence meant something else. He was keeping a close eye on one of those three men, and his murder confirmed it. He must have followed one of them into the gardens and got stabbed for his trouble. This evening after he told me Laura was on her way to London, Stein saw me come down from my room with a computer tote and hail a taxi. He didn't know what was on the computer, but he had to retrieve it or kill us trying."

"I see. And how did that message tell you it was Bert Stein?"

Linda smiled when she saw by Laura's expression that she'd realized the obvious answer herself. "Well, the names Zele and Patrick have no connection with Gibraltar, but I suddenly remembered that *Stein* is the German word for rock." ●

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PASSPORT TO CRIME

NAUSICAA'S BALL

by Paul Halter

Translated from the French by Robert Adey and John Pugmire

EQMM has mentioned before the availability in English of Paul Halter's short story collection *The Night of the Wolf*, whose title story appeared in *EQMM* in 2006. It's worth noting, however, that one of the other tales that appeared in that volume, "The Flower Girl," received a nomination for the Barry Award for Best Short Story of 2007. Currently three Halter novels have been translated into English, and all await a U.S. publisher.

On the advice of one of his nieces, Dr. Alan Twist was spending a few days vacation in Corfu: "You'll see," she had told him enthusiastically, "the Mediterranean air and that extraordinary light will do you the world of good, Uncle dear. And Corfu is superb, probably the most spectacular of all the islands in the Aegean."

On that point there couldn't be much doubt, the elderly criminologist thought to himself as he partook of an early breakfast on the hotel terrace. It was indeed a lovely spot, and the view of the coastline from the Hotel Poseidon, where he was staying, was quite breathtaking. Grassy promontories jutted out from the turquoise sea, creating a series of charming little coves, each invisible to the rest, and foam-flecked waves gently lapped the golden sands. The whole scene was bathed in a brilliantly clear light seldom seen in British skies.

"And best of all, it'll be a complete break and stop you from running into mayhem and murder wherever you go."

Stop running into mayhem and murder? Easy to say: as if he were responsible for how others behaved! If he had been involved so often in criminal matters, it was entirely because of his powers

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of deduction and because he'd had occasion to give Scotland Yard a hand when they occasionally came up against some inexplicable case. But this time he was determined to think about nothing but his holiday. Nonetheless, on the very first day of his arrival at the Poseidon, he had run into Charles Cullen, an old friend and recently retired Scotland Yard superintendent. He'd been delighted to see him, but inevitably they started reminiscing about old cases they had been involved in together: unusual cases with unexpected denouements, to which he'd made his own modest contributions.

The very man he'd been thinking about appeared just at that moment. Despite his casual dress, the ex-policeman cut a proud figure, with his upright stance and carefully groomed grey hair. He greeted Dr. Twist cheerfully and asked politely if he might join him. They chatted idly for a while but, after having praised the beauty of the surroundings, Charles Cullen suddenly lowered his voice.

"Tell me, Twist, do you get the same feeling I do about this place? Everything is so perfect and so peaceful, and the people are so charming, that it's almost eerie."

"It does all seem too good to be true," replied Twist mischievously, removing his pince-nez.

"Yes, in a way."

"You know, Charles, I'm too well aware of human nature to have any illusions."

"True. We're both too experienced for that. But since I've been here, I've noticed a certain tension in the air, as if something were about to happen."

Dr. Twist sighed: "Just remember who you're talking to! I often get that impression and, sad to say, I'm not often mistaken."

The former policeman turned to look at the gardens bordering the terrace. The chirping of cicadas could be heard from within the thickets of thorny bushes.

"Still, it seems that very little happens here. There hasn't been a suspicious accident for years, from what I've been told."

"There was an Italian who broke his ankle last month."

The ex-superintendent smiled gently: "Just a rather boring accident. Nothing to do with what we're talking about."

"Do you really think not? Apparently it's the third time a tourist has been injured at the same spot in less than a year."

"Here, at the hotel?"

"Close by: just in front of us, on the other side of the road. At the foot of the promontory there's a small cove which they call 'The Blue Lagoon.' Do you know it?"

"Of course. It's a charming spot, but getting down is a bit tricky. There's a series of steps cut into the rock which zig-zags down a hundred feet to the beach. Once you're there, you can rent a boat

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and there's even a small diving board."

"That's the place. To reach the diving board, you have to follow a devilishly slippery path which runs along the shoreline at the base of the cliff then curves around the promontory and into the cove."

"So, do you believe in cursed places?"

"Let's just say that some places are more dangerous than others."

"That's certainly true," agreed Cullen, gazing at the horizon. "As a matter of fact, here in Paleokastritsa we're not just in any old place. Apparently Ulysses got washed up in one of the local inlets, after escaping from Calypso's grasp."

"And was rescued by the charming Nausicaa, who happened to be playing ball on the beach with her entourage."

The ex-policeman smiled admiringly.

"Really, nothing escapes you, Twist. I assume then that you must also be aware that they made a film at this very spot about a year ago?"

"Yes, and I'm also aware that the main actors are staying here in this same hotel."

Charles Cullen heaved a deep sigh.

"You've just arrived and you already know everything, Twist. And here I was planning to surprise you."

The detective's eyes twinkled mischievously.

"It's just a matter of keeping one's eyes and ears open. And besides, how could anyone be anywhere near a beauty like Rachel Syms without noticing her?"

Twist went suddenly quiet. A couple had just appeared at the hotel entrance. The man, dark-haired and of medium height, was approaching his forties; his unprepossessing physique contrasted starkly with that of the ravishing creature by his side, who was none other than Rachel Syms. She was wearing a sports outfit with a tank top and short white cotton skirt that showed off her magnificent slender legs to perfection. The actress was clearly not in a good mood, but even the scowl on her face could not conceal its natural beauty, framed in a luxuriant mass of black hair which tumbled in opulent waves over her bronzed shoulders. She strode haughtily across the terrace by the side of her companion, who was carrying their beach gear and who, like her, ignored the seated guests.

After the couple had disappeared down the steps to the road, Charles Cullen observed to his companion: "You're right. How could anyone not notice her? But she doesn't seem to have a very sunny disposition."

Dr. Twist adjusted his pince-nez.

"That's fairly obvious, if you don't mind my saying so. But who was her companion? Was it one of the actors we were talking about?"

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"No, that's her husband, George Portman, the son of a rich industrialist, who's just come into a fortune. Quite a catch, financially speaking. Rumour has it that Rachel didn't marry him just for his blue eyes. What's more, they say that she fell in love with her screen partner, Anthony Stamp, during the making of the film last year. An unknown young actor who, according to the critics, was a marvelous Ulysses. The same wagging tongues say it was love at first sight, and it happened during the scene where Ulysses and Nausicaa meet on the beach, where she's throwing a ball around with her handmaidens."

The detective sighed.

"These things happen. One plays a game, and then ends up getting caught—in the trap of love."

The ex-superintendent gravely nodded his agreement.

"They were only rumours, but seemingly well-founded, if I trust the evidence of my own eyes. I've been here a week and I've had time to study all four of them: Rachel Syms, her husband, Anthony Stamp, and his girlfriend of the moment, Maggie Lester—an empty-headed blonde whose main attraction seems to be her remarkable figure."

"That's not a negligible asset for a woman."

"They lunch together frequently, and it's pretty obvious to me that the looks they exchange go beyond simple friendliness or professional courtesy. Portman doesn't seem to notice anything, but then everyone knows the husband is the last to catch on. As for the aforementioned Maggie Lester, it's more difficult to tell. She's more reserved and doesn't join in the conversation much. She must find it hard to swallow that Rachel's better looking."

Twist stroked his moustache thoughtfully.

"Why are they on holiday together? And why here? Is it just coincidence?"

"According to the hotel owner, they're going to be shooting another film here, with the same stars. That's all I can tell you."

His friend stared at him for a moment:

"I have a suspicion these were the people you were talking about earlier."

"It's not out of the question," admitted Charles Cullen with a wry smile. "One has a feeling there's a lot of tension there, like a gathering storm. I don't like the feeling I'm getting—but I must be off now, if you'll excuse me."

And with those words the ex-Yard man left, leaving Dr. Twist seemingly lost in thought. As the minutes went by, he felt the sun beating down more and more fiercely, despite the thick wickerwork trellis. The oppressive sensation grew stronger, and he was sure that the summer heat was not the sole cause. His old friend's observations had given him pause for thought and he felt somewhat perplexed. He made a conscious effort to ignore his growing

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suspicions, but in vain. He could not help but imagine that someone, at this very moment, was laying the groundwork for a Machiavellian crime against their nearest or dearest. Something wasn't quite right; he could feel it in his bones. The beauty of the landscape and the purity of the blue sky only served to enhance the impression.

The actress reappeared, this time alone, at ten o'clock—half an hour after she had left. It was obvious that something wasn't right. Rachel Syms was very pale and her hair was in disarray. As she went past, Dr. Twist noticed that her tank top was torn and there was a long scratch on her shoulder. The actress reached the bar and asked for a double Scotch, which she downed in a couple of gulps. Her eyes full of tears, she squeezed her hands together to avoid trembling. At this juncture Anthony Stamp arrived. Twist had already noticed his superb build and deep-set eyes. An Adonis with flowing locks, he was wearing shorts and a flowery shirt and holding a beach towel. He had been about to favour the actress with his most dazzling smile when he noticed her distress.

"Rachel, what's happened?" he asked in his throaty voice.

"Nothing."

"Nothing?" he repeated, pointing to the scratch on her shoulder.

The young woman swallowed several times, and with an effort held back her tears.

"I . . . I wanted to talk to him . . . and . . . and—"

The words wouldn't come out, and she broke down in sobs. Anthony tried to take her in his arms, but she pulled away and strode resolutely into the hotel lobby. The actor watched her, perplexed, and decided that he, too, needed a double Scotch. After emptying his glass, he went to find the young woman.

It all happened so quickly that Dr. Twist didn't have time to order his thoughts. Almost immediately afterwards, however, he was able to follow the rest of the conversation in the utmost detail. For the actress's room, which faced south, as did the terrace, was immediately above where Twist was sitting and the windows were wide open.

The unintentional eavesdropping caused the elderly detective considerable embarrassment, and he was not alone, to judge from the expression on his neighbours' faces.

"What's the matter?" he heard the young actor repeat in an insistent tone.

"I don't know . . . I don't know anything anymore," sobbed Rachel Syms. "But I do know that I hate him, I hate him, I hate him!"

"Did you tell him about us?"

"Yes, and he saw red. He insulted me, he even hit me. But I wasn't going to take it."

"Right. I'm going to have a few words with him."

"No, Tony, don't go. He . . . he—"

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"Anyway, we need to get things straight."

"Tony, Tony, I beg you. Don't go!"

There was the sound of a door slamming, and shortly afterwards Dr. Twist saw the young actor leave the hotel lobby. He was still carrying the beach towel, but perhaps only out of habit, for nothing in his manner suggested he was going for a dip. Still in a fury, he strode determinedly across the terrace and disappeared down the steps leading to the beach road.

When he reappeared a quarter of an hour later, his expression had changed completely. Clearly bewildered, his features drawn, he asked the barman to call the hotel owner, adding in a subdued voice that Mr. Portman had just had an accident.

An ambulance arrived shortly afterwards. Early in the afternoon, a police car drew up in front of the hotel. A little later, Charles Cullen was asked if he would care to join Inspector Christopoulos at the Blue Lagoon cove, where Mr. George Portman had had a fatal accident on the dangerous path bordering the shoreline. At the time, that was all that Dr. Twist knew, but at teatime his friend sought him out in the hotel lounge.

"Our premonitions were unfortunately correct," he announced sadly. "What we feared has happened. Sometimes, my dear Twist, I wonder if life is preordained. That accident is very strange. It happened in circumstances in which the police here, quite rightly, suspect something worse—"

"Murder, to be precise," cut in the detective.

Charles Cullen nodded, wiping his damp brow with the back of his hand.

"It's a delicate matter, because all those involved are British subjects—and pretty well-known ones. When the local inspector in charge of the investigation heard about my past, he quickly asked for my help."

"What have you found?"

"The circumstances are quite clear. Portman went down to the cove with his wife at nine-thirty. After a quarrel, Rachel left him down there. Scrambling along that tricky path, no doubt in an angry mood, his foot slipped and he fell, cracking his head fatally on a rock. That's where Anthony found him stretched out on the path, dead. According to him, it had happened only shortly before, because the body was still warm. And that was confirmed by the medical examiner."

"There's not necessarily anything suspicious in all that."

"Not necessarily. It's quite possible that Portman died falling down that way. But someone could equally well have hit him over the head, using who knows what weapon. What intrigued the inspector was that there were scratches on the victim's forearms. His quarrel with his wife could account for those, but once he

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learned about her relationship with that young actor . . . maybe the affair took a more sinister turn. The inspector could be right. Which reminds me, I took the liberty of telling him you were a first-hand witness. Is it true?"

Alan Twist repeated for his benefit all that he had seen and heard around the time of the crime. When he had finished, Cullen paused for a moment, then said: "I'd like to engage you as my assistant, if you don't mind. Inspector Christopoulos has more or less given me carte blanche, so he can't object."

"I assume the inspector suspects Rachel of having killed her husband during their quarrel?"

"There's no hiding things from you, is there? But let's face it, who better than you to form a judgment, given that you saw her return in a state of shock."

"What does she say about the matter?"

"That she doesn't remember very clearly. It's certainly true that she was in a sorry state when we went to her room to find her. She'd drunk about half a bottle of whiskey to calm herself down. But she seems to have recovered somewhat, and I'd like you to listen to what she has to say."

One of the hotel's private rooms had been set aside for Inspector Christopoulos, a small Greek gentleman with a bony face sprouting a handsome handlebar moustache. His tone was courteous and his smile discreet and friendly. Dr. Twist sat down next to Charles Cullen and opposite the lovely Rachel Syms, who was wearing dark glasses. She was evidently in a state of profound distress, her chest heaving under her thin bolero. Without prompting, she openly admitted her affair with Anthony Stamp.

"What's the point in denying it? Everyone seems to know!"

"It appears that you and your partner were here because you were going to make a new film together?" asked Christopoulos, lighting a cigarette.

"Yes, our producer asked us to come. He wants to make a sequel and suggested we come here to pick out suitable new sites."

"Which is why you, your late husband, and friends were exploring the coves in the area by boat?"

"That's right. But this morning George and I decided that we would seek the quiet of the cove, just the two of us. Which suited me, because I wanted to talk to him about Tony and me."

"You were hoping for a divorce?"

"Yes. That's what I was going to ask him for. But he took it very badly. He grabbed me by the shoulders and shook me to try and get me to change my mind. I fought back, as I've already told you several times."

"But what happened after that?" asked Christopoulos sharply.

The actress broke down in tears, her head between her hands.

"I don't know . . . I don't know exactly. His sudden outburst

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shocked me. I didn't know he could be like that. I ran away as fast as I could."

"After having hit him with a rock?"

The actress took her glasses off, revealing red eyes wet with tears, and said, stressing each word: "No, Inspector, I didn't kill him! Of that I am absolutely certain!"

"Then maybe you pushed him as you were leaving?"

"I just don't know. At the time, I didn't want to see him anymore; I just wanted to get away. Maybe I did want him dead at that moment, but I didn't kill him . . . I didn't kill him. . . ."

Anthony Stamp was next after his partner. Dr. Twist found him to be much quieter than he had been at the end of the morning. His testimony corresponded exactly, point by point, with what he had seen and heard. The actor admitted having considered teaching Portman a lesson for his brutal conduct towards his wife, but what he had wanted most of all was to make his feelings for Rachel and the serious nature of their relationship clear to the fellow.

Rubbing the back of his neck and recalling his astonishment at what had happened, he said: "That's why I was so surprised, do you see, at finding him lying there on the rocks. As soon as I got close I realized there was nothing to be done."

"What time was it?" enquired Charles Cullen.

"I didn't check my watch, but it must have been about quarter past ten."

"That's about right. You were seen leaving the hotel at ten past ten and you came back at ten twenty-five. It takes about five minutes to reach the cove."

"At least that. It's a winding path down the cliff face, going down steeply from the road to the beach."

"So you must have spent five minutes contemplating the body."

The observation seemed to catch the actor off guard.

"Well, yes, I suppose so. I was so shocked that I didn't react straightaway."

"What were your thoughts at the time, Mr. Stamp? That it was the work of your lover?"

The leading man suddenly appeared very uncomfortable.

"No, no. I was simply too stunned to think clearly."

"You told us there was nobody else in the cove at the time."

"No. The fellow who hires out the boats never arrives before half-past ten. All his customers know that. In any case, I didn't see anyone."

"The only access to the cove is via the stairs cut into the rock, as far as I can gather."

"Right. All around there are nothing but cliffs with a sheer drop of a hundred feet straight down. There are bushes dotted here and there on the cliff faces but too far apart to offer a way down, even to the most experienced climber. The stairs lead down to the.

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wooden landing stage where the boats are moored. From there, that damned slippery path goes as far as the diving board put there for tourists."

"But you could swim to the spot?"

"Of course, but in that case you'd have to come in from the open sea like the boats because the coastline is littered with reefs. Only a really experienced swimmer would try it."

"Do other boats ever stop there?"

"Occasionally. Amateur sailors who want to use the diving board or simply get away from the crowds. But why all these questions, gentlemen?"

"Why?" repeated Christopoulos with a forced smile. "Because we'd like to know who, apart from you and Rachel Syms, could have got close enough to George Portman to kill him. We can't rule out the possibility that he was murdered, you see. In which case, you and your mistress would be far and away the most likely suspects. You have both motive and opportunity. However, I do concede that your partner is in an even trickier position than you are. If we look at the circumstances, at her attitude and her words on her return from the cove, one could easily imagine that she had just killed her husband in a fit of anger. Furthermore, I've just had another talk with the medical examiner, who finds the wound to the victim's temple more and more suspicious. According to him, it was caused by a blunt instrument rather than sudden contact with a rock."

Anthony went pale.

"But that's not what I'd been led to believe! And there was no weapon anywhere near the body, was there? Unless your mysterious killer used a ball."

"A ball? What ball?" enquired Dr. Twist, intrigued.

Charles Cullen clarified the matter with a shrug of the shoulder: "A kid's ball was floating between the rocks close to the victim."

"Would that be Nausicaa's ball, Charles? Remember Nausicaa was playing with a ball when she noticed Ulysses on the shore? We spoke about it just this morning."

Faced with bewildered looks from the three men, Twist added quickly: "Of course, it's of no importance; it's just a thought which crossed my mind."

There was a knock on the door and an officer in uniform entered and saluted. He opened his dispatch bag, brought out a monkey wrench wrapped in nylon, and placed it carefully on the desk.

"The divers found this in the sea about thirty meters from the shore. As you can see, it's almost new. The water has probably washed away the blood, but not the fingerprints. They are quite clear and belong to one person only. We immediately compared them with those we took of the suspects."

The policeman turned slowly towards the actor and announced:

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"They're yours, sir."

Later that evening, under the subdued light of the lamps hanging from the trellis, Alan Twist and the superintendent dined together. The sun had just gone down and the air was marvelously soft and warm.

"He was so surprised I thought he was going to confess on the spot!" said the retired policeman after having finished his moussaka with evident gusto.

"Yes," agreed his companion, "but he acquitted himself well. Particularly since we now have the testimony of the boat owner that the wrench was left in there at all times because it was used to set up the canopy. And since that was the boat that was hired regularly by our little group, Anthony Stamp would naturally have handled it quite a few times, as he confirmed. He doesn't recall it falling into the water, but it's perfectly possible that a slight swell could have caused it to happen without anyone on board noticing."

Cullen shook his head, sceptically.

"That doesn't prove his innocence. At the time, he looked just like a culprit faced with irrefutable evidence, and he only came up with that explanation some time later."

"Don't you feel that, in such circumstances, an innocent person would have reacted the same way?"

"Possibly. But in my book he's still a suspect. I don't really believe that story about the wrench falling into the sea by accident. I was glad the inspector continued to press him. I have a feeling the fellow isn't as solid as he appears, despite his athletic build. He's an impulsive character who acts on the spur of the moment, going purely on instinct. I can see him going down to the cove with the intention of having it out with Portman. You saw him walk across the terrace, didn't you? He doesn't waste time arguing with his rival, he just picks the wrench up out of the boat and delivers the fatal blow. It's only afterwards that he starts to think and remembers the accidents that happen so frequently here. The reputation of the dangerous path could perhaps save him. He gets rid of the weapon by chucking it into the sea, then arranges the body as best he can on the rocks by the side of the path, with the head against a large one, so as to look like an accident."

"I'll take a walk to the scene of the crime tomorrow," said Alan Twist thoughtfully, 'to get my ideas straight. The exercise will do me good as well."

Charles Cullen regarded his companion shrewdly, as he lit a cigar.

"By the way, Twist, that comment about Nausicaa's ball didn't strike me as entirely innocent. You've something on your mind, haven't you?"

"Let's just say that I found the incident curious and that made me think about the story of Ulysses."

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"I thought about it afterwards. And it occurred to me that someone could have placed the ball on the path in order to precipitate Portman's fall."

"In broad daylight?" said Twist. "How could the victim have failed to see it, especially in a spot where great care had to be taken at all times? The murderer would be leaving too much to chance."

"Of course," said his companion with some irritation, "I did say it was just an idea. Have you a better one?"

"Well, it did make me think about another business. The culprit had jammed a half-filled balloon one step down from the top of a steep staircase. At night, it did the trick. The woman died of a broken neck. The poor woman had made the mistake of forbidding her son to reply to a passionate letter from a French female correspondent. The murderer was only fourteen years old."

"Yes, I remember it vaguely. And unfortunately, it's not the only such case. I could cite a number of similar ones, each more dreadful than the next. You're always telling yourself that there are no surprises left, and you're always wrong! But, getting back to the case in hand, Twist, you haven't answered my question."

The elderly detective shrugged his shoulders and smiled.

"Maybe we're attaching too much importance to it. After all, it's perfectly normal to find a ball on a beach, isn't it? I think we should consider it more of a psychological clue."

"Meaning?"

"Think of the passage in the Odyssey where Nausicaa drops her ball to go to the aid of the shipwrecked sailor."

"I don't understand. If Rachel and Anthony are Nausicaa and Ulysses respectively, what role would Portman play?"

"I don't know," replied Alan Twist, pensively. "Let's just consider Nausicaa, who was the one who dropped the ball . . ."

"So, as far as you're concerned, Rachel Syms is the guilty party?"

The question was still hanging in the air when Christopoulos arrived at their table, eyes gleaming and a smile on his lips.

"Well, he's confessed at last," he announced. "Our hard work paid off. I knew if we pressured him he would eventually talk!"

"What?" exclaimed Dr. Twist. "He's the killer?"

"No. He simply wanted to cover up the crime as an accident. Everything happened as he said, except that he didn't admit that he found the monkey wrench next to the body and simply threw it into the sea, in order to protect his mistress. So, despite a few complications, this matter turns out to be pretty straightforward. As we thought, Rachel Syms murdered her husband in a fit of rage."

Sometime around eleven that night, the detectives listened once more to the actress in the hotel's small salon. Flush with his earlier success, Christopoulos expected to be able to take the culprit's confession in his stride. But, contrary to his expectations, Rachel

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Syms didn't break down and tell him everything he wanted to hear. Although drained of her normal verve and energy, she nevertheless appeared to have recovered her spirit.

"What?" she exclaimed, eyes round with astonishment. "I'm supposed to have killed George with a wrench? But that's horrible. It's absurd! And I would have remembered! If you'd produced witnesses swearing that I pushed him, I might have believed you. But hit him with a weapon like that, never! It's not possible! I simply argued with him and left. I didn't want to see him again, ever. I remember practically running up all those steps. My lungs were on fire by the time I reached the road."

"We don't doubt that, madam," said Christopoulos with a respectful look. "I read in the newspapers that you are an accomplished athlete, and, if you will permit me to say so, it shows. But if we look at the facts calmly, you will understand that you are the only person capable of committing this unfortunate act. I have studied the chronology of events, which has been confirmed by witnesses. It goes like this:

"At nine-thirty, you and your husband left the hotel to go down to the cove. You came back here at ten, in a state of great agitation. Given that it takes five minutes to get there or back, you must have left your husband not later than nine fifty-five. You rushed to the bar and then to your room. Your conversation with your lover was overheard by Dr. Twist here, among others. It was ten past ten when Anthony Stamp left the hotel and ten-fifteen at the earliest when he arrived at the scene of the crime where he found your husband with the wrench next to him."

"My God!" gasped the actress. "So Tony also believes I killed George!"

"Think carefully. You plead with him not to go to the cove. Once there, he finds the body of your husband with the weapon by his side. He will have to answer for his act, but one might well consider it to be a chivalrous gesture to have made it disappear."

"Even so, I didn't kill my husband," the film star insisted.

"So who did, madam? Between the moment you left your husband to the time he was found dead, twenty minutes had gone by, at most. And according to your own testimony and that of your lover, there was nobody but you near the cove."

With her head in her hands, the lovely Rachel started to sob, then stammered:

"If—if only I could remember."

"You know, madam, it's not unusual for people to suffer temporary memory loss after a violent event. One's brain willingly shuts out despicable acts, particularly those which one regrets having committed. You have doubtless heard of Hercules, who killed his wife in a fit of anger. He also could remember nothing after the event. And, as you can see, the facts here speak for themselves:

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Your husband was never seen alive after your departure."

"Wait!" exclaimed Rachel Syms, suddenly sitting up. "I think there was a boat arriving just as I left him."

"A boat? Well, that's not out of the question. But we would need to know which one. There is no shortage of pleasure boats around here."

"No, it wasn't sailing past. It came towards the cove." Rachel shut her eyes to concentrate harder. "Yes, I'm sure. I couldn't see the passengers, but it could have been those charming retired people who go there regularly in the mornings. If so, they would certainly have spoken to George."

Christopoulos frowned.

"Guests in the hotel?"

"No, they don't stay at the Poseidon."

"Do you know them?"

"Not really. We've just exchanged a few words with them."

"That's all rather vague. If you don't know their names—"

"I do. They introduced themselves. It's something like French or Trent. Mr. and Mrs. Trent, I think."

"We will, of course, look into the matter," replied the detective, incredulously. "But I suggest you do not rejoice too soon."

The next morning, the investigators questioned Anthony's girlfriend. Maggie Lester's freckled features were pretty enough, and would have been even more attractive but for her rather listless appearance. Her exquisite tan complemented lovely blond locks and, thought Dr. Twist, she made a fitting companion for the handsome Anthony. But at that precise moment, having heard what the police had to say, it was obvious that her ardour for the actor had cooled.

"You must understand, miss, that in view of the circumstances we can no longer keep silent about your relationship," announced Christopoulos.

"I thought not," sighed the young woman. "Anyway, I always knew he wasn't the man for me."

"Why did you stay with him, then?" Charles Cullen could not help but ask.

"To have a good time. He's amusing and rich, and that's good enough for the time being."

Christopoulos cleared his throat and continued: "You are naturally free to live your life as you wish, but whether you like it or not, you are implicated in this matter and must therefore answer all our questions."

"Oh," said Maggie. "I thought the case was solved already."

"Meaning?"

"It was that woman who did her husband in, wasn't it? And who says it was in a fit of anger? I always did think she married him

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for his money."

"We haven't reached that point yet," said Christopoulos. "There are several points which need to be cleared up, including your own testimony, Miss Lester. According to your statement, you were visiting the monastery on the hill at the time of the incident. That seems strange—"

"What's strange?" demanded Maggie defiantly. "That I visited a monastery? I'm a practising Christian, however curious that might seem to you."

Christopoulos smiled nervously.

"That's not what I meant, miss. What I found strange was that the visit took place in the morning and, according to the hotel personnel, you have never been seen before noon, except when accompanying your friends on a boat trip."

"I don't deny it. But I'd been planning to see the monastery for some time now, and since the idea didn't appeal to Tony or Rachel or even her husband, I thought it would be a good moment to go."

"All right," said the policeman, consulting his notes. "But that's not the problem. We've questioned the priests and none of them can remember you. Don't you find that strange? There weren't that many people there yesterday morning. We gave them your description and—forgive me for saying this—there aren't that many pretty girls running around the monasteries."

For a moment Maggie Lester appeared disconcerted, but then she grinned broadly.

"I remember what happened. The first time I turned up they wouldn't let me in because I'd forgotten you had to cover your arms and shoulders. I went back to the hotel—not in a good mood, I can tell you—and, so as to be sure, the next time I tied my hair in a bun and put on a long black robe like the women around here. So it's more than likely they didn't recognize me the second time. But you can ask the gatekeeper, he'll remember my first visit: He looked me over from head to toe and stared at me a long time."

"What time was this?"

"When they opened, around nine o'clock."

"And at what time did you return to the monastery?"

"Somewhere around half an hour later," replied Maggie, evasively. "Just enough time for me to change and walk the round trip."

"Well, you certainly didn't dawdle on the way, because it's a good ten-minute walk from here to the monastery."

"I have strong legs and I love to walk."

"And to swim as well, someone told me?"

"Yes, I used to swim competitively. So did Rachel, by the way."

"Did you know her before you met Anthony?"

The girl's expression darkened.

"Yes, and I don't mind telling you that even in sports there was already an intense rivalry between us. It was through her that I

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met Tony."

"Did you know at the time that there was something going on between them?"

Maggie shrugged her shoulders.

"Of course not, otherwise . . . I'm broad-minded, but there are limits."

Christopoulos nodded and continued: "Let's talk about when you went back to the monastery, around nine-thirty. Did that gatekeeper you talked about recognize you?"

Maggie Lester smiled and shook her head.

"I doubt it. I didn't look the same, so he didn't give me a second glance."

"And when did you get back to the hotel?"

"At about eleven, which is when I heard the dreadful news."

Christopoulos seemed on the point of asking another question when the telephone rang. He listened expressionless for a minute, and when he replaced the receiver he seemed somber and perplexed.

"Rachel Syms has been eliminated from our list of suspects," he announced. "Five minutes before her lover found the body, Portman was still alive."

In the early afternoon, Dr. Twist and Charles Cullen went down to the "Blue Lagoon" via the steps, which clung to the side of the cliff amidst a fragrant vegetation buzzing with cicadas. From time to time, gaps in the greenery opened up to reveal magnificent views of the azure sea. As they rounded the base of the promontory to reach the cove they could see a small wooden landing-stage surrounded by boats. They took the path along the shore and stopped at the spot where Portman had died.

"Well, there don't appear to be many solutions to the puzzle," declared Twist.

"I'd settle for one," replied Cullen.

"Did you hear what the Trents had to say this morning?"

"Yes, they're quite definite in their statement, which bears out precisely what Rachel Syms claimed. It was they who arrived by boat just as Rachel was walking away from her husband, shortly before ten o'clock. They're a retired couple who live in a hotel across the bay and who come here regularly at that time because it's a good place to dive, which they like to do before continuing down the coast. They moored their boat to the landing-stage while Portman was sitting close by, staring at the sea. He nodded to them as they walked past. He seemed his usual affable self, although he appeared preoccupied. After they had completed their usual three dives, which took less than ten minutes, they walked back and, as they passed Portman again, asked him if all was well. He replied that life was full of ups and downs, at which point they boarded their boat and cast off. According to them it was then

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ten past ten."

"And five minutes later Portman was found dead, beaten over the head with a monkey wrench."

"That's according to Anthony Stamp's testimony, and it looks as though he's been lying through his teeth. After all, from what we now know, who else could have committed the crime?" Charles Cullen asked, looking at the surrounding scenery. "Apparently, no one. Particularly since the Trents claim they didn't see any boats, swimmers, or anyone else while they were in the cove. Which would leave less than five minutes for any other killer to act. It's simply not possible. I'm afraid Anthony Stamp's fate is sealed."

Without saying a word, Dr. Twist walked the length of the path to the diving board, picking his way carefully over the slippery surface.

"My goodness, do you realize how deep the water is here? I can't see the bottom."

"Naturally; it's the underwater extension of the cliff. That's why this spot was chosen."

"It's a marvelous place," said Twist, straightening up and looking around. "You feel totally isolated from the rest of the world: The reefs on either side of the cove protect you from intruders and you can't see beyond the promontories on either side. It truly is a Blue Lagoon: the water is so limpid and suffused with light, it's an enchanted spot."

"What's your point, Twist?" asked his friend, frowning.

"That this spot is isolated and difficult to reach, but it would be easy to hide in the deep water near the diving board, wait for the Trents to leave, then rush Portman and fatally wound him. How long would that take, Charles?"

"No more than a few seconds."

"Quite. Then all the killer would need to do is disappear back into the hiding place."

"Then swim under water to make his escape?"

"For a good swimmer, it wouldn't be a problem, would it?"

"It's quite plausible, particularly because I doubt that when Anthony Stamp discovered the body, he spent much time inspecting the surface of the water for a murderous swimmer. I think I can see where you're going with this, Twist."

"Maybe not."

"Let's just say I know who you're thinking about."

"Actually, I'm thinking about an object, not a person."

"Let me guess: a palm tree? . . . a cool aperitif?"

"No. A ball."

"Not that damn ball again! I really think you're on the wrong track there, Twist. We found the owner: a young lad staying at the hotel, who lost it the evening before the murder. He was even scolded by his grandmother for running across the road to try and catch it."

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Cullen nodded towards the edge of the cliff high above their heads: "Ignoring his grandmother, he ran to the cliff and looked over, where he saw the ball hadn't fallen in the water at all, but was stuck between the rocks. He was quite relieved because he thought he'd be able to collect it the next day. That's the whole story and you can see it has nothing whatever to do with the murder investigation."

Dr. Twist expressed some surprise: "Do you mean to say the ball fell from up there?"

"Yes. What's so strange about that?"

"Nothing. Little boys are always losing their toys in impossible places."

"So, what's the point?" said the ex-superintendent, obviously becoming exasperated.

"I think I've just realised something important," replied Twist with a little smile. "Oh, and I must point out something about Tony's fingerprints. In fact, it's quite astonishing nobody's noticed it until now."

The next day, Christopoulos called the suspects together. Alan Twist and Charles Cullen were also present, as well as two sinister-looking policemen to guard the door. Maggie Lester seemed on her guard; Rachel Syms appeared worn out, as did her lover, whom Christopoulos addressed formally.

"I must warn you, Mr. Stamp, that anything you say may be taken down and used in evidence against you."

"You're planning to arrest me?" gasped the actor with a piteous look.

The policeman stroked his moustache gravely.

"To be frank, I should have done so already, even before Dr. Twist confirmed his latest discovery. Be that as it may, we will now proceed with the arrest. I must tell you also that, should you make a confession, it may reduce the charges and even help you avoid the ultimate sanction."

The young actor clenched his fists and blurted out: "But I'm not the murderer! I just wanted to save Rachel. That's why I threw away the wrench."

Rachel Syms gave a deep sigh.

"So you thought I did it?"

"No, I didn't think so. But now, with all the facts—"

Christopoulos called for silence and took control. He gave a detailed chronological account of everyone's movements on the morning of the murder. By the time he had finished, Anthony Sharp was holding his head and groaning: "I tell you, somebody else killed him."

"Who and when?" asked Christopoulos vehemently.

"I don't know who, but it was just before I arrived on the spot.

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Remember, I told you Portman's body was still warm."

"The Trents didn't see anyone as they were leaving."

"Somebody may have been in the water waiting for a suitable moment."

"We thought of that. Mr. Cullen has some comments on that score. He can explain it himself."

The retired British policeman cleared his throat.

"My theory rests on the fact that the swimmer was aware the Blue Lagoon would be the scene of a quarrel between the couple, so he or she must be someone close to them. It's possible to reach that cove by swimming round from the other side of the promontory, which is quite dangerous but can be done in half an hour. Given the murder took place between ten-ten and ten-fifteen, the swimmer must have left the nearest cove, the one below the monastery hill, at nine-forty at the latest, and returned there after the crime. Given that Rachel Syms could not have committed the murder because she was still in the hotel when her lover left, who's left?"

In the silence that followed, all eyes turned to Maggie Lester, who shot a baleful glance at Christopoulos.

"After all those loaded questions yesterday, I knew you suspected me."

"I was merely trying to establish that you had no alibi, miss," he replied with a smile, "which does indeed seem to be the case. Nobody at the monastery can identify you as having been there. You could have acted in the manner Mr. Cullen described. You had the time, the opportunity, and the motive."

"Which was?"

"Jealousy. To pay your companion back for his infidelity, you committed a crime knowing it would be blamed on him."

The accusation elicited a cynical sneer.

"Do you think I would have done that because of Tony? Taken all those risks for that . . . look at him! Out of the glare of the spotlight, he's just a wimp, good for stealing schoolgirls from their spotty boyfriends. Do that because of Tony? You must be joking!"

Anthony Stamp looked hurt, while Charles Cullen continued: "What's clear is that there was premeditation, for there were only your prints on the wrench, Mr. Stamp, and that's significant. As Dr. Twist pointed out, several people on the boat were said to have handled it at one time or another, yet yours were the only prints found. Hence, someone deliberately wiped the wrench clean and waited for Anthony Stamp to touch it so they could take it and use it the following day. I'll let Dr. Twist explain his theory."

The elderly detective looked at all the suspects in turn over his pince-nez before picking up the thread.

"It's quite simple. There's not much to say except that that manoeuvre reveals the murderer's strategy. After committing the crime, the killer carefully placed the weapon where we found it.

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Actually, it may not even have been the real weapon, which could have been an iron bar, but no matter. What is clear is that the wrench was left next to the body so that Stamp couldn't fail to see it. What, then, would be his reaction? It could only be one of two possibilities . . .

"The first: do nothing and simply report what he had seen. The circumstances under which the body was found, plus his prints on the weapon, would frame him as the guilty party. The second: throw away the weapon in order to save his mistress, for it was she at whom the evidence pointed. That's actually what he did, and I'm willing to bet that the murderer banked on it; banked on the police finding the weapon on the rocks or in the sea, at which point the actor would be caught like a rat in a trap, particularly after the Trents' testimony. Nobody would believe he'd been trying to save his mistress. Any such claim would seem like another lie, digging himself into an even deeper hole. The only worry the killer might have had was that the weapon would not be found, in which case it would seem like an accident, and no harm done.

"Now, the murderer's need to pin the crime on someone reduced the field of suspects considerably, for it meant that it was necessary for the police to be handed a suspect. In other words, the killer was someone on whom suspicion would otherwise naturally fall."

After a long pause, Rachel Syms fluttered her eyelashes and said: "Do you mean me?"

"Yes, Miss Syms, you, his wife, set to inherit a considerable fortune. I'm only guessing, but I suspect you took up with your previous costar for the sole purpose of using him; for, as I said, you needed a scapegoat. Everything was worked out in the most minute detail: the time and the place of the crime; your confession to your husband of your infidelity, simply to drive him into such a rage he would hit you; the bruises and scratches on your body when you came back to the hotel, so that your furious lover would be seen racing down to the beach to teach the fellow a lesson. It was all very cleverly done: to appear to be guilty at first, only to be proved innocent by surprise witnesses later!

"Yes, everything had been worked out and prepared in advance. You knew at exactly what time the Trents would anchor in the cove and you knew their testimony would save you and deal a fatal blow to your lover. From an artistic point of view, it was a remarkable murder. One cannot help but admire your ingenious plan, not to mention your acting, but nobody doubts your ability in that direction."

After another stunned silence, the lovely Rachel threw her head back and laughed, but for once her amusement sounded strained.

"It's—it's grotesque," she gasped. "But supposing everything you say about my motive is true, how the devil could I have done it, while I was in the hotel all the time? Didn't you see me at the time

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the crime was committed?"

"Actually, it was slightly before. And I also heard you—as you intended, for you deliberately raised your voice and left your window open. It was ten-ten when your lover crossed the terrace."

"Exactly, and I begged him to come back. How could I have got down before him without being seen. He was walking very fast."

"Yes, but you had a few minutes in hand as he descended the cliff path. You went out of one of the side doors of the hotel and reached the cove before he did."

"How? On a magic carpet?"

"No, there was nothing magic about it. You simply followed the ball . . . Nausicaa's ball. Have you forgotten?"

The actress looked about her, then tapped her temple with a finger and sneered: "He's completely out of his mind! He'll say anything that comes into his head."

A dangerous glint came into Dr. Twist's eye.

"No, madam, I'm not mad. I still have all my faculties, unfortunately for you. You did follow, to within a few yards, the trajectory of the ball that fell from the top of the cliff yesterday. While your lover was making his way slowly and carefully down the cliff path, and just after the Trents left the cove—which you could see from where you were—you made a graceful dive from the top of the cliff into the only spot where the water is deep enough: by the diving board. A dive of a hundred feet: dangerous for an amateur, but nothing to a competitive swimmer of your class.

"You climbed swiftly out of the water, killed your husband—who was probably stupefied with shock—and planted the wrench, after which you rapidly climbed the sheer cliff face using the rope you had secured from the top that morning. Tony couldn't see you because the view from the path was blocked by the promontory and you knew that nobody else would be around in the water. In any case, for an athlete like you it would only have taken a minute to climb a hundred feet, after which you hid the rope. You may even have had time to watch the scene down in the cove below and see how your lover would react. All you then had to do was get discreetly back to your room, swallow a few glasses of whiskey, and play out the comedy."

Pure hatred flashed in the eyes of the actress as she hissed: "You miserable old wizard!"

"No, it's you who are the witch, and let's hope the jury sees it that way."

"How did you work it out?" said the actress, still spitting with rage.

"Why, because of Nausicaa's ball, of course. I suspected you as soon as I saw it. Purely by intuition, I must admit. I told myself it was a sign from the gods. Who could have played such a trick on poor Portman, if not the mischievous Nausicaa playing with her ball?" ●

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After Babygirl

by Jean Femling

Californian Jean Femling is the author of three mystery novels: *Getting Mine* and *Hush Money* (St. Martin's), and *Backyard* (Harper & Row). Her short stories have appeared in *Without a Clue, Descant,* and elsewhere. She joins us this month with a high-speed, high-tension adventure on the road that has its origin in a situation many of us have witnessed.

She started it.

She made it happen.

Dillon was just sitting there in the double left-turn pocket onto Fair waiting for the signal to change when he happened to glance over at the car beside him. And there she was, staring at him. Her mouth was even open a little—when his eyes met hers she kind of flinched like she was waking up and snapped her eyes forward. Probably she couldn't believe her luck.

She gave him a good long look at her profile, which was perfect. A little prize, she was, silky skin bare to the shoulder and then everything covered; light blond hair pulled up on top in a bunch. Her left forearm was lying on the doorframe, her window actually open. Little hands with natural pink fingernails white-tipped, none of this black garbage, and he really liked that, too. She was sort of stroking her side mirror, like it was somebody's face.

His new music system going, the gigantic bass speakers booming almost too low to hear, you more felt them; so low they shook the ground and the car like bombs tramping. She had to feel them, too, slamming into her, invading, and she couldn't move, couldn't get away, she had to sit right there and take it. He stared at her but she kept turned away, she wouldn't look back. That was calculated, too; everything to lure him.

Dillon was so turned on he only now thought to lean over and talk to her. But then the signal changed, the cars in front started to move, and she jumped forward like a scared little rabbit. The car in front of Dillon was slow and he wanted him to stomp it so he could pull even with her and get something going. She had bitchin' wheels; a tan Mercedes 360SL—probably a high-school graduation present from her daddy. Maybe even her sixteenth birthday. Probably she was her daddy's Babygirl, he would get her anything.

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She had only to ask. Not like Dillon's beat-up Camaro; it still needed a lot of work and he was still paying on it.

How old would she be? Twenty, max, he'd bet. Dillon was old enough to get his guts shot out, if he was stupid enough to volunteer, but not to buy a beer. An hour till he had to be at work; his two junk classes for the day done. He had time.

Babygirl's lane was moving faster than his: Dillon shoved his snout right in behind her, making the next car back hit his brakes with a screech and an angry honk. And Babygirl noticed Dillon: In her rearview mirror he saw the sudden panic flare in her eyes. Now, how to get her to stop? Too much traffic to pull alongside and try the old low rear tire bit on her. Follow her when she pulled off? She might be pretty close to home, though. He could see the top half of her face perfectly, and she wasn't looking at him now. Worried, more. Like guilty, daydreaming about a strange guy in another car.

What was all that crap along the bottom of her rear window? Oh; little stuffed toys. A monkey, a tiger—alligator, bluebird, polar bear. Even a buffalo with horns. The car in front of Babygirl now was a dusty old chug, and that suited Dillon just fine for the moment. Heyyy . . . she was moving one lane left, maybe for the freeway entry lane. This was beginning to look promising.

Onto the freeway and starting to move. Now Dillon could let it out a little, let her see his style. Some way he had to get her to pull off at one of these exits. He couldn't do anything till he got to talk to her. Through the 405 bottleneck; time enough here to give him a sign. But she got into the middle lane and built up to 75, and then just held steady. Seven or eight cars ahead of her there was a big square truck, plain white: She'd have to go around that. In the meantime Dillon tried pulling up close behind her right on her bumper and then backing off a little, rocking it up and back, up and back, as close as he dared. She'd have to get that signal. But she drove straight ahead, hunched forward over the wheel.

Harass her enough so she'd be screaming to get off the freeway. Dillon tried pulling alongside her and then swerving like he was going to jam himself in front of her; and again, again. But she held her speed, her eyes terrified. The truck ahead was opening up, they were all beginning to move. Ah; now her cell phone comes out, glued to her head. Dillon was too close for her to pick up his license number, he was positive. Only four cars ahead of her, and now three. Two.

Cell phone down. Dillon sees Babygirl looking to move over into the right lane, certainly to get off. But no, they fly right on past the off ramp, she's not going to get off. Baby bitch. And he the dog in heat. Dillon grins: a good song title. Now she's the last one and she pulls in snug behind the truck. Like a sheep and it's some kind of shelter. Nutso—the truck driver has no idea she's back there, he can't possibly see her. And suddenly the truck isn't moving ahead: It's shuddering, tires screaming, that huge block of white getting

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bigger—Babygirl is going straight into it, everything in slo-mo, it takes forever and here goes Dillon, there's nowhere else, he braces his arms on the wheel, her rear window a sheet of red like a shade coming down onto the toys . . . Too-loud glass crumbling . . . escalating beyond hearing—

In orbit, screaming in a long flat trajectory too fast to hear. Out of sight—Blinding—Everything black . . .

Cool Empty

One part screams—crushing him. Caught. Held. Sudden cold. Too many sensations.

Darker again. A little warmer. Snuffling sounds. Dillon can't see things, only a lighter blob with red along the top—his mother, her red bangs. He recognizes her smell, flowery-sweet and Margarita.

The next time, Dillon knew something had happened but he didn't know what. Not in his car now, the beat was sort of there but the music was gone. When he tried to turn over, he couldn't, the fissure opened, lava spurting, and he had to stop while the fire burned out. When he could try again, he couldn't move, he was fastened. Tied down. The one leg up in the air he couldn't feel, but his arms were both nailed, the right arm against the bed railing. His left side was weirder, his elbow held bent over his chest. When he yelled, only a rattle came out. He could still hear, if he couldn't see much. The parts of the room, the TV and the door, stayed put now, so he began to figure this was real.

"What happened?" he asked once and this person started talking about a serious accident, but he couldn't get it. This green ghost, but very solid, was there again poking at him, in his ear, sticking Dillon's wrist. He started to lay out the ghost but it was too hard, too hard, he faded.

A big fuss somewhere close. They rolled in a bed, an old man unconscious, just out of surgery, on it, but the family didn't want him in this room. Arguing and then yelling. Then everybody was gone, no old man, the room was empty.

Somebody on each side of Dillon pushing him over, moving wires and tubes—it hurt him, he screamed, but they went on lifting him and handing stuff back and forth around him. "In that case," one of them said, "is he under arrest, or what?"

"Don't see any armed guard. Not that he could move if he wanted to."

"Dillon? Come on, Bungee-Bunge, you can do it. Do it for Mommy." Bungy, the kid nickname from that time he tried to jump off the garage holding on to some bungee cords. She was rubbing on him, his arm, he wanted her to quit but he couldn't make the words

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come out, only a sound.

"Oh, thank God!" his mother said. "I came straight from the airport, can you believe it took four hours to get out of Vegas? When they finally got around to locating me. And I've been back up here three times already. Bungy? You're not going to slip away again on me, are you?"

She went over to the TV, which was hung way high, and turned it on. "You will not believe the crap . . ." When she came back she pulled a chair close to him. "I know you're awake, I can see it in your eyes. Well, after what you've been through." She kept trying to find a patch of him to pat, but it was mostly tubes and wrappings. The announcer said something about a freeway accident and his mother sat up straight, talking louder than the announcer.

"There she goes again, raving about it all. Yes, it was a terrible accident—you hear that? Exactly what they just said: an accident. And yes, she's lost her daughter; but she's not the only one suffering here. Look what we almost lost. A very near thing." She watched, glued to the TV, sucking air through her teeth. Dillon closed his eyes. He'd just figured out that the catheter was the worst, most fiendish form of the torture; and there was absolutely nothing he could do about it. He pretended to be asleep, hoping she would go away.

"You forget how many people there are that get off on this personal fame thing," his mother said. "You won't believe the kind of stories they're out there telling about this. Must've been about three thousand witnesses, by the sound. Absolutely disgusting. Feeding on other people's pain and misery."

The announcer went on talking and his mother did, too. "Oh: And now she's complaining because the police didn't check you for drugs and your blood-alcohol level, for God's sake. The woman is mad." Dillon ignored her, looking sideways and squinting hard to focus on the picture of a pretty girl filling up the screen. For a second he got it: Babygirl. It was the first time Dillon remembered Babygirl, sitting in her car beside him at the signal, looking over. But he didn't remember any accident. Anyway, she must be dead. Everybody said so.

The green ghosts in the squared-off caps were aides; they appeared in the dead of night or even broad daylight, handling parts of him. In the night he looked over and saw the shadow of one of them in the doorway, tilting in sideways but just still. She looked familiar. Not very big. He couldn't quite see her face, but he didn't need to; he knew it was Babygirl. Perfectly normal. Because if she was dead she wasn't tied down to one place anymore, she could go anywhere.

Click: The doctor standing there again, it must be morning. He was the bastard told them to put that damn catheter in Dillon. Showing off for these other people around him—when he asked Dillon questions, Dillon just snarled and shook his bed till it jingled. The doctor got mad and planted his hand on Dillon's shoulder. "Listen to

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me, young man. You're very seriously injured, we've been able to perform some extremely delicate repair work, but you're on the way to doing yourself serious harm. Now, you can either cooperate and start to mend, or we'll have to keep you knocked out, which could greatly delay your recovery. To put it mildly." He started to leave, and turned back. "I mean it. One wrong move, and Rip! That's all she wrote."

Dillon's buddies Jake and Chuy came to see him, Chuy hanging by the door—Dillon could see people more clearly now. They were pretty embarrassed, they didn't know what to say. So then, Dillon was a really big deal; they couldn't stay away. "You saw they got something going alongside the freeway?" Jake said. "Right where it happened? Flowers. Teddy bears. 'Course nobody can stop and stand there."

"Kind of thrown over," Chuy said. "Probably put it out at night. Real early morning."

"Yeah?" Dillon answered, even though his face hurt to talk. "See it on TV, or in person?"

"Oh, we went on over there," Jake said.

Dillon saw a Game Boy in Jake's pocket, but Jake didn't mention it, obviously because Dillon couldn't move. Jake asked him how the food was.

"What food?" Dillon raised his arm with the IV in it.

The one thing they wanted him to talk about was the girl: They thought that aspect of it was really hot. They kept mentioning details about it to each other. A nurse stuck her head in, checked Dillon's chart. "No unauthorized visitors. Out, out!"

As they were leaving Chuy said, "Hey, you heard about the anti-vigil they got going now? Right outside here."

"Yeah," Jake said. "Three girls all Gothed up—you know, black clothes and the black lipstick, and the eyes. Big signs: 'Free Dillon.'"

"One had a skull and crossbones on it," Chuy said.

"Send them on up," Dillon said.

Dillon's mother made her evening run. "Yes, I've been up here night and day," she said into her cell phone; he heard her.

"I understand the mother really got cranked up today," she said to Dillon, flipping channels to try all the different ten P.M. L.A. news. "Just can't let it die down normally."

They'd changed his position, and now Dillon couldn't quite see the TV screen. But he heard it, all right. "In fact, the victim's mother is convinced that Dillon Karchner's actions were deliberate, and she's lined up several motorists she claims will give sworn statements to that effect."

"This man is guilty of the murders of my daughter and my grandchild," a woman's voice said. "I demand he be arrested and tried for committing a double homicide."

When the news changed, Dillon saw his mother standing in the

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center of the floor as if waiting.

"There was a kid in the car?" he said.

"She was eight months pregnant," his mother said. She rushed over to the bed and clutched Dillon's free wrist. "Don't you worry about it; don't even think about it. Just a real unlucky day all around. Certainly it was a tragedy, and yes, the woman lost her daughter. And I very nearly lost you. But if she doesn't quit spouting off, I'm going to sue her ass for libel."

Dillon felt his anger rise. It didn't have to be like this. "What really happened," he said, moving his bruised and swollen mouth carefully, "she—came on to me."

"What?" His mother was electrified, but trying to look calm.

"She did it all. Licking her lips. She'd like, laugh, and hang herself out the window. Showing off the goodies. Asking for it. She was hot."

"You're kidding!" His mother's smile is pinched in a little now.

"I wish I could remember the rest of it," Dillon said. "Any of the accident."

"No, you don't," his mother said. "Everybody here knows not to talk about it."

"Why's that?"

"Because we want you to get well, as fast as possible. Put it all behind you. Forget about it."

Dillon breathed till he calmed down some. "Now, you tell me what happened," he said.

She did the thirty-second job he expected. One of those nasty rear-enders, she said: truck driver's doing. No way Dillon could've foreseen it. She kissed the side of his head goodnight and went away.

When he was alone and it got quiet, Dillon pulled up his mental pictures of Babygirl again. He tried to bring back all the pieces, every moment just as it had happened. The row of stuffed toys along the rear window for Daddy's Babygirl. Peeking at him in her mirror, begging and teasing. It was a terrible night, Dillon's breathing was labored and wheezy—he decided he'd ask his favorite spook to help him if she showed up. But she never appeared.

In the almost-dark a thing hit Dillon's harness softly and fell on his naked chest, where it lay, itchy, the rest of the night. It had hard points that scratched his chest, especially when he started to sweat, but he couldn't manage to joggle it off, or reach it to move it away. And it smelled bad, too, sort of rotten.

He was having trouble breathing now, too, his face swollen and his chest, it was puffed out against his belly. He dragged the air in and out through his mouth and heard himself, noisy as an old dog. He was going to suffocate.

"Babygirl?" he called softly. "Hey! How about some help here?" But nothing happened. And then after a while, when he looked up again, she was there, a little too far toward the head of the bed for him to

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see her well. She just stood there looking down on him for a minute. Babygirl, sure enough, but older, tired-faced, with hollows and dark around the eyes, and he knew she was not going to do him any good.

Next morning when the nurse came in she picked up the scratchy thing and then showed it to him. It was a little stuffed polar bear, its plushy feet and lower half blackened and stiff, and Dillon knew exactly where it came from: He remembered it perfectly, sitting in Babygirl's rear window between the bluebird and the buffalo.

"Pretty sick joke your buddies played on you, huh," the nurse said. "Now you see why we have to have these restrictions."

And something more. When she looked at Dillon's IV, her face turned grim. "What's with this?" she muttered. She felt his face and his feet and legs, and did something to the IV rig. He heard her arguing with someone in the hall, and she came back several times to check him. Already Dillon felt his breathing eased. Now he was sure of his green ghost's intention toward him. He would have to be on guard.

Next night, Dillon accepted sleep early, to be ready for Babygirl's visit. In the quiet dark he woke and tried to keep watching for the familiar shadow in the doorway. A square of light appeared in the wall directly opposite and Dillon shifted, confused. It was about two feet across, looking out on a grassy hillside where Babygirl was playing, barefoot. She's little, maybe kindergarten size, but he knows her instantly. She's smiling at him, coming toward him step . . . step . . . step, pretending to creep up on him, with both hands out in front as if she's offering him something, only her hands are empty. And she's smiling.

Now she's older, maybe middle-school size, bigger and always closer. And the smile. Blond hair totally straight and hanging. She holds it up on one side like a curtain to show him her gold hoop earring.

Now the square is spreading, Babygirl's so close and coming straight at him, but barely smiling—she's got something in mind. Dillon tries to back away, he doesn't want her to touch him, It's poison, It'll burn, and she's whispering, "Dillon? Dillon?" The damn harness holds him locked tight. He strains against it—And she's gone; no Babygirl. Only the car window with all the grubby little animals stuck in red-black tar. And the whisper: "Dillon? Dillon?" Moving rightward along the window, a big face, Babygirl's face smeared with blood. Her eyes are closed and she's smiling, she keeps whispering, "Dillon? Dillon?" even though her mouth is closed. Dillon jerks away, lunging backward, and splits it open, rips it all out, lets loose the torrent of lava—

The alarm sounds in the nurse's station, she's there in two minutes: It's Code Blue. What a bloody mess. The tired old baby-face in the borrowed green scrubs doesn't see any of it. Bone-tired, carrying the black plastic projector, already around the corner of the corridor and into the elevator, descending with her eyes closed. Praying for the dead and the living. ●

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Art by Laurie Harden

THE WICKERN BOYS

by Stephen Ross

The knife-edge of winter was a pleasant time during which to travel by rail. Autumn's dying breath could be observed from the warmth of the train carriage, and the moment savored with a sip from a flask of hot tea.

Inspector Quayle drained the mug. It wasn't that he enjoyed the yearly demise of the English countryside, but rather, he welcomed the sense of coziness it ushered in—a warm fire, a comfortable armchair, and a damn good book. And were it not for the fact the country was at war, he would have enjoyed it a whole lot more.

Quayle lit a cigarette. He was a slim man with a slight moustache. There had to be better things to occupy his time than investigating the disappearance of an elderly schoolmaster-cum-tutor from a country estate in the West Midlands. It wasn't as if London was without its share of missing persons—Herr Hitler was seeing to that on a nightly basis.

The word had come from on high. The schoolmaster was an elderly man by the name of Peter Black. Black was tutor to the two Wickern boys at Mallbright, and the boys' father, Lord Wickern, was a senior official at the ministry of defense with the ear of the prime

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minister. Black had vanished, seemingly without trace, and Lord Wickern wanted it *"looked into and taken care of."*

The journey was three hours by rail out of Paddington Station. Mallbright was nestled in among the rolling hills and vales north of the Cotswolds. It had been the seat of the Wickern family since the time of Cromwell.

The Mallbright groundsman collected Quayle from the local train station in the late afternoon, and from there it was a forty-minute ride by horse and open carriage.

The groundsman went by the name of Standish. He was a gruff old man of few words. Easily in his eighties, wiry with a grizzled jaw, he had the appearance of someone who'd been left out in the rain for a year. And fifteen minutes into the carriage ride, he finally spoke. He leant back in the driver's seat and asked a question over his shoulder: "Is it just you, then?"

"What were you expecting?" Quayle asked. He was seated directly behind the old man.

"The master said there were coppers coming. Is it only you?"

"Yes. Finding a missing schoolmaster is hardly a priority at this point in the kingdom's history."

The groundsman nodded appreciatively. He snapped his whip at the horses.

Quayle adjusted his scarf. It was bitterly cold. "Aside from the Wickern boys, who lives at Mallbright at the moment?"

"There's Mrs. Chalmers, the housekeeper. There's young Margaret, the housemaid. There's Joseph, the stable lad. And then there's me—I look after the grounds and tend to things."

"And the schoolmaster would have made five?"

"Aye, a staff of five. In ordinary times, we be forty-two of us, but not since the war come." He shook his head. "They've all gone now—some into factories, some into uniform."

The final approach to Mallbright was along a sweeping drive leading to a building that reminded Quayle rather of the British Museum—three floors of austere gray architecture and a façade the length of his entire neighborhood back in Shepherd's Bush.

"How often does Lord Wickern come up from London?"

"We've not seen the master in a year."

2006 Department of First Stories author Stephen Ross makes his second appearance in *EQMM* this month. His "day job" as an IT programmer and technical writer also involves editing and contributing to his company's magazine, and he sometimes freelances as a newspaper columnist. But writing is not Mr. Ross's only interest. The New Zealand resident also composes songs and plays the piano. ✝

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As the horses brought the carriage closer to the house, Standish glanced back over his shoulder. "This is what we're fighting for," he rasped.

"Your master's house?"

"England."

Mrs. Chalmers, the housekeeper, was a strong-minded Irishwoman who walked with the clip of a woman thirty years her junior. She was dressed in drab colors and her hair was tied back into a severe bun. Quayle trailed along behind her.

"The schoolmaster's been gone for nearly two weeks," Mrs. Chalmers reported. "One day he was here, the next day he was not."

The interior of the house—if such a word suited—was labyrinthine. Hallways and passages led to even more hallways and passages, with staircases leading up and down seemingly around every turn. And every inch of it was devoid of life. It was like touring a mausoleum.

"This must be a difficult place to keep clean," Quayle observed. His voice actually echoed.

The Irishwoman glanced back at him. There was weariness in her brow. "Most of the rooms have been shut up since the war's come. The south wing has been closed down entirely—ever since Lady Wickern died." She crossed herself. "God rest her soul."

"The boys' mother?"

She nodded. "Lady Wickern was returning from New York in the first months of the war. A German U-boat sank her ship in the middle of the night. All lives were lost."

The destination of Mrs. Chalmers' march was the schoolmaster's bedroom. It was a small, tidy room. There was a bed, a bookshelf, and a writing desk with a view of the grounds to the west of the house.

She drew back the curtain. "Like I said. One day the schoolmaster was here, the next day he was not."

"What do you think happened to him?" Quayle asked.

She looked doubtful. "Were it not for his shoes, I wouldn't have troubled Lord Wickern. I would have assumed the man had just up and left in the night."

"His shoes?"

"Black has four pairs of shoes, and if you look in his closet, you will find *four* pairs of shoes."

Quayle looked. There were four pairs of polished shoes.

"He was always a fancy dresser," the housekeeper remarked. "Always well turned out."

Quayle had noted the clothing hanging above the shoes. The schoolmaster evidently knew a good tailor.

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"And as best I can see, not one stitch is missing. If he did just up and leave in the night, he did so in bare feet and in his nightshirt."

Quayle took a look under the bed. There was a suitcase. He dragged it out. The suitcase was adorned with numerous luggage labels. He opened it. It was empty.

"Where's his passport?"

The housekeeper didn't know.

On the bedside table was a pair of spectacles and a book: Charles Dickens' *A Tale of Two Cities.* On the writing desk beneath the window lay a pocket watch and a pipe. There was also a ration book—it was in Black's name. Even just a cursory glance about the room suggested that if the man had just up and left in the night, he had apparently done so empty-handed.

"I will need to speak to the boys."

"They'll be at their lessons in the schoolroom."

"Without a teacher?"

Mrs. Chalmers nodded. "They're very good. Like little gentlemen, they are."

The schoolroom was on the floor above the servants' hall. There was a blackboard at the front, next to which was a desk for the teacher. There was a large globe, several bookcases lined with scholarly tomes, and, facing the blackboard, six student desks—suggesting the room had served many generations of Wickerns.

"You're a policeman, aren't you?" one of the Wickern boys inquired. He didn't look up from his book. His voice sounded like that of a mildly irritated peer of the realm.

Quayle had entered and had been observing from the rear.

The boys were seated at their desks. The boy who had spoken was studying a book on the history of the monarchy. He glanced back over his shoulder to confirm his suspicion. The scar on his cheek announced him as Richard Wickern—he had fallen badly from a tree when he was six.

Quayle crossed the room. "I'm Detective Inspector Quayle." He walked around and in front of the desks.

The Wickern boys were identical twins. They had matching small faces, curly blond hair, and pale blue eyes. There was only one distinguishing feature that could separate the two of them—Richard's scar.

"Are you with Scotland Yard?" the other boy, Rawdon Wickern, asked.

"Yes."

Rawdon was preoccupied with tying knots into lengths of twine, reading the instructions from a Boy Scout manual. He was as well spoken as his brother. "Have you come to look for the schoolmaster?"

"Yes, I have."

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"May we see your identification?" Richard asked.

Quayle obliged.

Richard took the inspector's badge, and the two boys examined it with forensic interest.

The Wickern boys were dressed alike in tailored outfits. They were children, but with their manner and tone of speaking—daggers dipped in honey—they were like two miniature Edwardian gentlemen.

"Where were you born, Inspector *Ian Edward Quayle?*" Richard asked.

"London."

"Shouldn't you be fighting in the war?" Rawdon asked.

"I'm too old for that."

"How old are you?"

"Sixty-six."

"We're fourteen. We're twins."

"Did you fight in the Great War?" Richard asked.

Quayle nodded. "I was a sergeant."

Richard passed the identification back. "Have you met our father?"

"No, I haven't."

"Our father works at the War Office."

"He's very important," Rawdon added.

"So I understand."

Richard leant back in his chair and stared indifferently at the inspector. "We don't know where *Black* has gone." His pronunciation of the schoolmaster's name was with such distinctive sharpness, it almost carved the word into two syllables.

"What kind of man was he?" Quayle asked. He lit a cigarette.

Young Margaret motioned to speak, but then thought better of it. The housemaid couldn't have been much older than the two boys, a tiny thing with a face of freckles.

The five of them—Quayle, Standish, Mrs. Chalmers, Margaret, and Joseph the stableboy—were seated at the dinner table in the servants' hall. Supper had been polished off, and coffee was being drunk. The Wickern boys had been fed earlier, upstairs in the dining room, and had been seen off to bed.

Joseph the stableboy had said nothing throughout the supper. He was a peculiar boy of eighteen. His eyes never appeared to focus on anything, and his face seemed to be permanently on the verge of a smile.

"The schoolmaster was always reading," Mrs. Chalmers commented. "He always had a book in his hand." She licked her fingertip and dabbed up the remaining crumbs from the breadboard. "I couldn't begin to think what's happened to him."

Standish lit his pipe. "Maybe the man got what he deserved."

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"What is that supposed to mean?"

"I'm just saying." Standish stubbed out his match in an ashtray. "I never did like the man."

"Why didn't you like him?" Quayle asked.

The groundsman's face crinkled up into a scowl. "He was a bit toffee, for a servant. He spoke with an accent like he was one of them upstairs."

"So, he was well spoken and well dressed," the housekeeper said. "That's no reason to wish ill of him."

Standish shook his head. "If you ask me, you're wasting your time." He glanced across the table at the inspector. "The man's cleared off. It's as plain as the moustache under your nose."

"We heard something," young Margaret finally said.

"What did you hear?" Quayle asked her.

"In the night. We heard a noise. I reckon it was a gun." She nodded with wide eyes. "It came from the south wing."

"There's nowt in the south wing," Standish remarked.

Mrs. Chalmers was shaking her head. "That noise, whatever it was, had nothing to do with the schoolmaster's disappearance. We heard that noise the night *after* he'd gone."

Mallbright was freezing at night. It was after two in the morning, and Quayle was sitting upright in bed, buried under a mound of blankets and wearing a woolen nightcap. He had been billeted in the schoolmaster's room. The bed had been made fresh the day the man had disappeared, and Mrs. Chalmers saw no good reason in opening up any other rooms, given that an empty bed already lay waiting.

Quayle examined the book lying on the bedside table. He opened it to the first page. *"It was the best of times, it was the worst of times."* Dickens was one of his favorite authors. The author was also apparently one of the schoolmaster's favorites—there was a dedication on the book's title page. It was written in a wide hand:

To Peter,
Because I know you adore Dickens.
Your brother, DES
London, 1897

The book had been read many times since that dedication. On almost every page, Black had made annotations in the margins—scholarly observations, in small, delicate handwriting.

There were footsteps. Quayle looked up. Someone was outside in the hallway. There was a faint reflection of candlelight on the shiny floorboards underneath the closed door. Someone had stopped outside his room.

Quayle listened closely. There were softly spoken voices—to

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whom they belonged and what they were saying he couldn't determine. There was a click as the door handle was taken in someone's hand. It slowly began to rotate.

"Who is it?" Quayle asked in a sharp voice.

The door handle fell limp. The reflection of candlelight vanished.

Quayle jumped out of bed. Within seconds, he had opened the door and was standing outside his room.

There was no one there. The only sound he could now hear was that of the wind rustling branches against the windowpanes at the end of the hallway.

Breakfast the next morning consisted of coffee and a cigarette. Quayle consumed it in the servant's hall around eight. He was alone—the household staff having promptly begun their day at five-thirty. And after breakfast, he ventured to another country: the south wing.

The south wing was the oldest part of the house. It constituted the original Mallbright—the building having been steadily augmented and added to by every successive generation of Wickerns. As a result, the overall structure was that of a vast maze of mismatched rooms, passageways, and staircases.

There was a discernible stillness in the rooms of the south wing. It was as though life had taken pause there and was waiting patiently for the war to end. No one lived in that part of the house. It was dark and empty, and acres of sheets covered nearly everything in sight. There was also a distinctive mustiness—a damp odor that hung in the air in the hallways. It made Quayle's nose itch.

"Who goes there?"

The blunt barrel of a rifle confronted the inspector. He had just turned a corner in the hallway, and Rawdon was aiming at his head.

"What is the password?" the boy demanded.

"Put that down," Quayle barked. Rawdon was holding a .303 Lee-Enfield rifle.

"Don't worry, Inspector," Richard said. "It isn't loaded." He had come out of the darkness from behind his brother.

Rawdon lowered the rifle.

"Why are you boys playing in this part of the house?" Quayle asked. He noticed Richard was holding a similar rifle. "I thought this part of the house was closed down?"

"We're not playing," Richard explained. "We're practicing. If the German army invades, we wish to be ready." The boy then slung the strap of his rifle over his shoulder and marched back up the hall from where he had come.

Rawdon did the same, but he paused for a moment before following his brother. "He had a secret."

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"Who did?" Quayle asked.

"The schoolmaster."

"What kind of secret?"

"A dirty secret." The boy then about-faced and marched off like a toy solider.

Quayle followed after them.

The boys were quick. They slipped away with ease. They knew the layout of the house from instinct, and within a minute, Quayle had lost sight of them completely.

Turning another corner, and starting to run, Quayle's shin connected with a solid deadweight on wheels—a wooden trolley—and he tripped headfirst over it.

"Oh dear, oh dear! Have you hurt yourself?" It was Mrs. Chalmers. She was approaching from another direction, a tin of Brasso in one hand and a cloth in the other. She helped the inspector back to his feet.

"I've told the boys not to play with that," she said of the trolley. "It's for moving pianos. It's not a toy. And it's not meant to be left out in the hallway where visitors can do themselves an injury by tripping over it."

"I'm all right," Quayle insisted. His trouser leg was ripped, and he was bleeding.

The housekeeper led the inspector back to the other side of the house. Along the way, she explained that there were four pianos in the house, that Lady Wickern—God rest her soul—had been a pianist of some ability, and ever since her death, not a solitary note had been played on any one of the things.

Mrs. Chalmers wrapped a bandage around Quayle's leg as best she could. The inspector had his foot up on a chair in the kitchen.

"It won't stop the bruising," she remarked. "But it will settle it down."

"How did Black and the two boys get along together?" Quayle asked.

"I think the three of them got along well." She safety-pinned the bandage in place. "They were certainly always together, I can tell you that."

"What did the boys think of Black, did they ever say?"

She shrugged her shoulders. "I supposed they liked him. I can't be saying I've ever had reason to think otherwise."

Quayle tried walking. It was uncomfortable. "One other thing. Do you have any idea where I could locate his brother, Des?"

The housekeeper shook her head. "I really couldn't say." She then added: "I didn't know the schoolmaster had a brother called Des. I knew of a brother called David, but he died some time ago."

Young Margaret informed Quayle she had turned fifteen only two

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weeks earlier—she was proud of this fact. She was dusting in the main dining room. The dining table was a long slab of oak with seating for forty.

Young Margaret also had an opinion on the relationship between the schoolmaster and the two boys. "He liked Richard and Rawdon very much," she said. She then corrected herself. "No, he loved them. He thought the world of those two boys. They were like his children."

She also commented that she found the schoolmaster to be a kind and gentle man. She knew the other household staff didn't care for him, in particular Mr. Standish, but the schoolmaster had always been thoroughly pleasant to her.

"Where are the bullets kept?" Quayle asked.

"What bullets would *they* be?" Standish replied. He was standing by the stable entrance. He held the halter to a chestnut-coloured gelding and was gently stroking its neck. Joseph the stableboy was at the rear of the horse, hammering in a new shoe.

"The two boys are inside playing soldiers," Quayle said. "They've got a couple of army-issue rifles."

"All the bullets are under lock and key."

"Whose lock and key?"

"Mine. And never you mind the boys. They're just children. They're just playing."

Quayle lit a cigarette. "When I was a lad, I played with marbles and conkers."

Joseph finished his task. He wandered up alongside Standish and stared at the inspector. It was unnerving. The boy never blinked.

"He's not right," Standish remarked. He patted Joseph's head.

Joseph grinned. "The snow will come soon," he announced. "Everything will be white."

"That thought worries me." Quayle looked out across the lawn and into the distance. Almost all he could see was Mallbright—the estate was several hundred acres of rolling countryside. "Is there anywhere on the property Black could have ventured to and got into trouble?"

"Like I said last night at supper," Standish rasped, "the schoolmaster's cleared off. He'll not be found here."

Quayle stared at him. "You seem rather sure of that."

The old man led the horse out of the stable. Its shoes clattered on the cobbles. "There's nowt happens at Mallbright that I don't know about."

"Then, by that statement, you know what happened to him."

Standish answered with stony silence. He led the horse away.

Three hours later, it occurred to Quayle he should have brought

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something to eat. He had gone on a ramble to the far reaches of the grounds with nothing more than a sore leg, cigarettes, and a half-full hip flask of brandy.

He also realized he didn't much fancy winter in the countryside. The air had a forbidding and arctic bite to it, the trees were all dead, and the ground was sodden. And nowhere on the estate was the schoolmaster to be found—as far as he could determine.

In the late afternoon, Quayle found the Wickern boys back in the schoolroom. They were reading—one had a book on British naval victories, the other a book on Napoleon's defeat at Waterloo. Neither was in a pressing hurry to acknowledge the inspector's presence.

He stood in front of their desks and cleared his throat.

Rawdon eventually looked up.

"What was his secret?" Quayle asked.

The child didn't answer. His expression gave away nothing.

Richard glanced at his brother. It was an icy stare.

"You said the schoolmaster had a *dirty secret.* What was it?"

"It is distasteful," Richard answered on his brother's behalf. "And we do not care to discuss it."

Rawdon brought a single finger vertically to his pursed lips and made the gesture of silence. "We're reading," he whispered. The pair of them returned to the depths of their books.

Quayle exhaled a gust of air. The two boys might have been children, but they had mastered the landed gentry's ability to thoroughly ignore anyone should they choose to.

"Last night, someone went to open the door to my room," Quayle said. "That was you two boys, wasn't it?"

Richard nodded unabashedly. "You are correct."

No explanation was forthcoming.

Quayle put a cigarette to his mouth. "May I ask why?" He took out his matches.

"We were on patrol," Rawdon answered. "And we would prefer it if you did not smoke in this room."

"What do you mean—you were *on patrol?"*

"Night watch," Richard said. "We patrol the house at set times during the evening."

"We don't want to be caught off guard," Rawdon added. "If there is an attack, it will come in the night."

Quayle returned his cigarette to the case. He shook his head. "You boys are utterly obsessed with this war."

"War is a serious thing, Inspector," Richard remarked.

"You're children. You're living here in the lap of luxury. You're hundreds of miles from the hell that is London at the moment, or the Continent. You should be enjoying your childhoods."

The sound of a distant bell echoed in the hall outside the school-

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room. The two boys instinctively closed their books and stood up from their desks.

"Excuse us," Richard said. "That is our call to dinner."

"So, where is the schoolmaster?" Mrs. Chalmers asked.

"Yes," young Margaret asked. "Do you know what's happened to him?"

Quayle shook his head. "No, I don't." He glanced across the table at Standish. The old man avoided his eyes and drank from his mug.

The four members of the household staff, together with the inspector, were back at the dinner table in the servants' hall. They were eating a supper of bangers and mash, albeit meager portions. Outside the house, the howling of wind could be heard. The weather had turned in the night.

Mrs. Chalmers looked dissatisfied. "Have you in fact learnt *anything* about his disappearance?"

Quayle wiped his lips on a napkin. "I don't know where the schoolmaster is, but I am certain of three things."

"It's going to snow soon," Joseph said. He giggled. "Everything will be white."

Standish hit the boy over the back of the head to shut him up, after which Joseph stared at the tabletop with a sour expression.

"I'm certain he didn't leave this house of his own volition," Quayle said. "His personal effects are still present in his room. Simply put, as you yourself observed, Mrs. Chalmers—four pairs of shoes."

"And the second thing?" she asked him.

"Black was well traveled. The markings on his suitcase demonstrate that—Paris, Frankfurt, Vienna, and so on. And yet his passport is not to be found."

"Did you not find it in his room?"

"No. In fact, it's the only possession of Black's that *does* seem to be missing. I am certain the explanation for its absence will prove important."

"What is the third thing?" young Margaret asked.

Quayle ran his eyes around the table. They came to a rest on Standish. "I am absolutely certain there are people in this house who know more about what happened to the schoolmaster than they are telling me."

Young Margaret noticed the inspector's stare.

"I'm going into the village tomorrow," Quayle said. "I'm going to call on the local constabulary, and the constabulary for the district. I'm going to organize a thorough search of this entire house and of the grounds. I *will* get to the bottom of this mystery, you can sleep soundly on that."

Mrs. Chalmers had also noticed. She herself was now staring at the groundsman.

"And when the truth comes out," Quayle added. "I may find I am

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not a happy man."

"Standish," Mrs. Chalmers asked. "Do you know something about where the schoolmaster's gone?"

The old man shook his head. He ignored their eyes and proceeded to light his pipe.

At that moment, upstairs in the schoolmaster's bedroom, Richard was seated on the edge of the bed. He was examining Quayle's police notebook, having already quietly and efficiently gone through the inspector's other belongings.

Downstairs, the door to the servant's dining room was open, and outside in the hallway, unseen by any of those seated at the table, was Rawdon. His back was hard against the wall next to the open doorway and his head was crooked, affording him the best position to hear the conversation from within.

Quayle lit a cigarette. "Mrs. Chalmers, did you know that Richard and Rawdon come out and play at night, after everyone's gone to bed?"

"They do?" This was news to her.

"They patrol the house, pretending to be soldiers."

Young Margaret was nodding. "I've heard them."

"Well, they should be in their room and in bed," Mrs. Chalmers said. "They shouldn't be out at night."

"I don't think they should be playing with rifles, either," Quayle added. "Whether they're loaded or not."

Standish cleared his throat. "If the German army comes, them two young masters will be the only ones here to protect us." He swallowed the last contents of his mug, stood it on the table with a clap, and got to his feet. He muttered something to Joseph, clipped the boy about the head, and then the two of them left.

Mrs. Chalmers gave their departure a long stare. "I hope this dreadful war ends soon," she said. "So we can all live normally again and this house can be back to the way it should be."

"Amen to that," Quayle said.

Sometime after one in the morning, Quayle woke. The bedroom door was open, and the bed was shaking. There were shadows—someone had climbed onto the bed and had straddled him. *Clomp.* He was hit in the head with a club of wood and knocked unconscious.

Quayle regained some of his senses. His limbs were bound with tight rope. He could see little. He was on his side, less than a foot above the ground, and was moving slowly along the hallway—he was lying on the piano trolley.

A voice whispered: "He's awake."

Clomp.

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Quayle opened his eyes. There was a candle burning. His sight was blurred and his head was throbbing. He had a migraine. He felt his hands—they were no longer tied together. His nightdress was filthy, and he ached from bruises. He had been dragged across the floor for part of his journey and dumped into this location.

He was on the floor in a room without windows. The door was shut. The only thing in the room was a small wooden box—an empty wine case. A solitary candle in a silver holder stood upon it.

He sat up. The floor was stone and cold. The air was damp and musty. The dampness was familiar. His nose itched. He guessed he was in the south wing, beneath the floors, in the cellar.

The door opened. Richard and Rawdon entered. They were dressed in black clothes—uniform-like—and they blended into the night like shadows. They wore solemn expressions.

"What in God's name are you boys playing at?" Quayle asked.

"Whom are you working for?" Richard asked.

"Why have you come to Mallbright?" Rawdon asked.

"Why have you dragged me down into the cellar in the middle of the night?" Quayle shot back at them. He clambered to get up. He was groggy. His eyes could barely focus. When he was almost to his feet, a chain connecting from the wall to a manacle clamped around his ankle came abruptly to its full length. The jolt toppled him, bringing him crashing back to the ground again.

"Unlock this!" Quayle barked from the floor. "Let me out of this!"

The boys stared at him, unmoved.

"You two are in a lot of trouble," Quayle growled. "I don't give a *damn* who you have for a father."

"You are compiling reports," Richard said. He held up the inspector's notebook. "There are reports in this book on everyone in the house, about the house itself, our weapons, and the location of our ammunition."

"I'm a policeman," Quayle said. "Those are notes. That is what you will find in a policeman's notebook."

"You acknowledge this book is yours," Richard asked. "And written by your hand?"

"Of course it's mine and written by me," Quayle answered him. "You know that very well. You've apparently stolen it from my room."

The two boys nodded to each other, then turned about and left.

"Come back here," Quayle shouted after them.

They left the door open. He was indeed in the cellar. There was a dark corridor leading away from his cell.

Quayle tried to free his leg, but it wasn't possible. The manacle was iron and layered with rust. The chain was bolted to the wall.

"Hello?" Quayle shouted. "Can anyone hear me?"

Rawdon stepped into the doorway—the two boys were apparently just outside, just beyond the door. He shook his head. "You're too far

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away for any of them to hear you." He stepped out of sight again.

Quayle could hear the boys' voices, faint whispers and murmurs. A discussion went on for some time. There was debate. And then agreement.

A moment later, they returned.

Richard stepped up and addressed the prisoner. "Ian Edward Quayle, if that is indeed your true name, you have been found guilty of spying for the German enemy."

Quayle stared in disbelief. "Spying?"

Richard nodded. "And for this crime, you have been condemned to death."

Quayle roared in anger. "This game stops right here and right now!"

Richard turned about and left the room.

Rawdon remained. He stared thoughtfully at the inspector. "What you said tonight at your dinner was correct. The schoolmaster's passport *was* important."

Quayle tried to get to his feet, but could only manage to get to his knees.

Rawdon reached into his back pocket. He produced a German passport. He stepped forward and held it open in front of Quayle's face. "Read the name."

Quayle read it aloud: *Peter Heinrich Schwarz.*

"Schwarz is the German word for *Black,*" Rawdon explained. "The schoolmaster lied about his identity. He was German. He pretended to be English. He hid this passport, but we found it."

Quayle remembered the brother's dedication in the book in the schoolmaster's room: DES. Mrs. Chalmers had said she only knew of a brother called David. DES wasn't a name—it was the *initials* of a name.

"*This* is the schoolmaster's dirty secret?" Quayle asked.

The boy nodded.

Quayle shook his head wearily. "Hundreds of Germans living in this country have changed or hidden their names, so as to avoid persecution or internment. They have nothing to do with the fighting."

Rawdon closed the passport and returned it to his pocket.

"It's not a crime to have been born in Germany or to have had German ancestry."

"We are at war with Germany," Rawdon replied. There was no emotion in his eyes.

"My God," Quayle said. "*This* is what happened to the schoolmaster. You dragged him from his bed and brought him down here."

Richard returned. He held one of the rifles.

The enormity of what had happened, and what was *now* happening, burned inside the inspector's skull.

Rawdon brought a finger to his lips . . . silence.

Richard aimed the rifle. Before he pulled the trigger, he said: "This is for our mother." ●

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Art by Mark Evan Walker

DIAMOND RUBY

by Joseph Wallace

"You've got no choice," the man said.

He leaned back against the splintery bench, his head outlined against the steel-gray sky and sea, and smiled down at the girl sitting beside him. His teeth were white behind his thin lips, and his eyes were silvery as they scanned her face.

The two of them sitting there like father and daughter on a visit to Coney Island. But no family in its right mind would linger on the Boardwalk today, with the wind chasing curtains of sand and ragged waves grinding against the beach. The only other people in sight were hurrying past, heads down, hats pulled low over their eyes.

"No choice," the man said again.

The girl, a fair-skinned teenager with an oval face and dark eyes, huddled deeper into her cloth coat and didn't speak.

"You listening to me?"

Finally she lifted her head to look at him. "I'm listening," she said in a whispery voice. "The answer's still no."

He shook his head, and for an instant seemed almost sorry for her. "You have no idea what I'm talking about," he said. "You don't get it."

No longer smiling, he got to his feet.

"But you will," he said.

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The big man stood at home plate, waving that ridiculously heavy bat over his head and grinning out at the mound. He wasn't young anymore, and all those hot dogs and cigars and late nights had begun to take their toll. For a few years already he'd had a bit of a shelf above his thin waist and banjo legs, but now he was running to fat, his belly pushing against his pinstriped jersey.

Same grin as always, though. Same moon face and crinkled-up eyes and pure joy in doing whatever he did. Those hadn't changed. You almost *had* to smile back when you saw him.

Professional nonfiction writer Joseph Wallace's books include *The Autobiography of Baseball,* which was nominated for the Seymour medal for best baseball book of 1998. He began writing short stories recently and has appeared in the anthologies *Hardboiled Brooklyn, Baltimore Noir,* and *Bronx Noir.* For his *EQMM* debut he employs his knowledge of baseball in a most inventive way. †

Unless you were standing just sixty feet and a hair away from him and those amazing arms that could whip the bat around and send the ball back at you twice as fast as you threw it in. Take your head off and you'd find yourself thinking, "How'd that happen?" out in centerfield somewhere while your body was still standing on the mound.

"You ready, kid?" he called out.

Rue Thomas nodded.

The big man took a vicious cut, his bat a blur. "Then let's *go.*"

The crowd loving it. How many? Four thousand, at least. Maybe five. More than had ever packed little Mansfield Grounds before, that was for sure. Yelling and screaming and making the old wooden grandstands shake. Sending a fleet of gulls flapping away towards the ocean in panic.

Everybody who could buy or beg or steal a ticket was here. Here for an event big enough to shut down Coney Island, to hush the clatter of the Cyclone and the Thunderbolt. All of the attractions silent, because what would be the use of opening till the game ended? Who would come to Coney Island today and not want to see the Babe, the Bambino, the Big Bam, Jidge.

Babe Ruth, the most famous man on earth, facing off against Rue Thomas, the seventeen-year-old Brooklyn girl with lightning in her left arm.

The Babe settled back into his coiled batting stance. He was still grinning, but Rue could see something different in those guileless eyes. They seemed to sharpen, and his face, his whole body, grew still, watchful, attentive. Focused.

On Rue, on her hand, on the ball itself.

This white sphere.

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Rue was nine when she first found out.

Before that, she wasn't much different from any other kid on East 21st Street, skinny and dirty-kneed, with a mass of dark ringlets that framed her face.

But though few noticed, her hands were different, bigger and stronger than most of the boys'. And her fingers were long and tapered, ideal for running up and down the keys of a piano, people told her, if her parents could have afforded one.

Still, she was just another neighborhood girl until the day Billy O'Reilly tried to steal her brother Nick's bicycle.

Billy O'Reilly and his gang from up on Nostrand Avenue, coming through like a thunderstorm. Four of them, pushing poor little Tim Trotta into the bushes, throwing Cliff Jamison's hat up onto a roof.

The usual. You just waited for it to pass, like you'd wait out the storm.

But then Billy grabbed Nick's bike and took off. Nick had worked for a year delivering milk with Mr. Stephanides to buy that bike. Now, even if they saw it again, it would be wrecked. No one could bust something up like Billy could.

Nick and a couple of the others went running down the street, chasing, but it was hopeless. The littler kids just stood and watched, except for Rue.

Rue, standing in her front yard, looked down at the stone resting in her left hand. She'd picked it up without even realizing, and now she hefted it, enjoying its weight and cool smoothness against her palm.

Then she let fly, and an instant later Billy lay moaning on the street. The newly riderless bike made a gentle right turn and fell on its side.

There was a moment of dead silence as everyone stared at her. Then, shouting and cursing, Billy's friends came running back.

Rue bent down and picked up another stone. "Watch," she said in her wispy little-girl's voice, a voice that was usually easy to ignore. But not now, not when the second stone whanged off a street sign, leaving a big dent. Not when she found a third one and raised her eyes to look at them again.

As his friends hoisted Billy up and half-carried him away, everyone else clustered around her. "Where'd you learn to do that?" Nick said. He was holding his bike like it was a gift from heaven.

Rue shrugged. A million hours spent throwing a ragged stitched-up ball against a white square painted on the garage wall, and no one had ever noticed.

Till now. The very next Saturday Nick brought her down to Marine Park, and an hour later she was pitching for the neighborhood baseball team.

Some people said the diamond was no place for a girl, especially a little one like Rue Thomas. But the minute they saw her fastball

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and drop curve and fadeaway, they shut right up.

Because they played for money, every Sunday morning in Marine Park. Money and neighborhood pride. And if it would help you win, no rule book said a chimpanzee, an alligator, a sewer rat, or a girl couldn't play.

He showed up for the first time midway through Rue's rookie season with the Comets, just a week after her sixteenth birthday. He was waiting outside the players' door at Mansfield Grounds after a game, leaning against a scrawny locust tree like he had all the time in the world.

Thin, well-dressed, with a quick, toothy grin and silvery eyes. Smiling at her as she walked past, heading towards the El.

He fell into step beside her. "Buy you a soda?"

His voice gentler than she'd expected. But confident, like he was used to people doing what he wanted.

She kept walking.

"Or a—whaddaya call it? An egg cream?"

From out of town. She'd guessed from his look, and from his voice, too, though she hadn't done enough traveling yet to figure out where. She stopped and looked him up and down, in his gray suit and well-brushed hat.

Forty years old, maybe more. And far from the first to try this. "Sorry," she said. "Not interested."

He laughed, showing those white teeth. "What you're thinking, I'm not interested either," he said. "I'm talking about business. Baseball business."

Rue hesitated. It was 1931, and times were hard. Her parents had already moved twice, from the house on East 21st to an apartment over on Ocean Avenue, and then to another one in a worse neighborhood on Quentin Road. Sometimes they didn't have enough to eat.

If someone wanted to talk business, you listened.

"I'll buy you a burger," the man said. "To go along with that soda."

His name was Chase. He said he was from Chicago.

All she had to do, he told her, was lose every once in a while.

They sat in a booth way in the back of Benny's, a place a few blocks towards the bad side of Coney Island. She'd never been there before, but the food tasted just fine.

She let him describe what he wanted, although she'd understood where he was headed in the first ten seconds. She knew how it worked, with ballplayers being paid to make an error here, strike out there, throw just a few bad pitches at important moments.

That kind of thing had been around as long as baseball. It'd gotten so bad that a whole World Series had been lost on purpose, Rue knew, back in 1919, when she was only four. After that they'd brought in this old man, a judge, to make sure baseball stayed on

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the up and up. The first thing he'd done was kick eight of the guilty players out of baseball forever.

Rue had pitched against one of them, Joe Jackson, a tired, hollow-eyed old guy, when a barnstorming team had stopped in Brooklyn the previous fall. He hadn't been able to get around on her fastball.

She listened to Chase. Waited till she was nearly done with her Coke and hamburger before saying, "Sorry."

He looked at her. "At least listen to what we're offering."

She shook her head.

Chase seemed unruffled. "Not every game, of course. Only every once in a while. Wouldn't want to ruin your reputation." He paused for a second. "Though it might be better for you in the long run, you weren't quite so good."

At the time, Rue was 9-1, with an earned-run average of under 2.00.

"You're hot stuff," he went on. "Some think it's a joke, a setup. Others think you're for real. Either way, there's a ton of action whenever you pitch, all over the country."

Rue thought about that.

He leaned closer to her, and she could smell his cigarette breath. "Five hundred every time you do what we ask. Like every three or four starts. Nobody will ever know."

Rue did the math. She probably had fifteen more starts left in the season, so he was talking about two thousand bucks, maybe more. A lot of money.

But lose on purpose? How could she do that? "No," she said, draining the last of her drink and getting to her feet. "Still no."

Her wide eyes, her quiet voice, making him disbelieve her. "You'll come around," he said. "You'll change your mind."

She turned away.

"Your problem is, you think you've got a choice," he called after her. "But you don't."

The first time she heard that from him, but not the last.

Diamond Ruby. Belle of the Ball. Queen of Diamonds. The "Out" Girl.

The Angel of Brooklyn.

Silent Rue, sometimes, because of her fragile voice.

Even just plain Rue every once in a while. It made for a good headline joke: "Opponents Rue the Day Captain Mansfield Signed Girl Phenom."

She'd been just fifteen when the old Army officer who owned the Coney Island Comets came to watch her pitch in Marine Park. By then she'd gotten some local attention, not that it mattered much to her. All she wanted to do was pitch, win, and collect the money she was owed to help her family scrape along.

Captain Mansfield, bluff, loud, friendly, looking at his team like it was a toy, had other ideas. "Sign with me," he'd said, "and we'll make a fortune."

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Underneath all his jollity he was a smart businessman. Because he certainly made himself a pretty penny from all the fans who came to the ballpark to watch Diamond Ruby, the freak of nature straight out of a Coney Island sideshow, pitch. To see this little girl with the unhittable fastball and knee-buckling curve mow down men who were heading to the majors, or who'd already been there and were heading down.

But very few of those pretty pennies ever made it into Diamond Ruby's pockets.

Rue's first pitch to the Babe bounced two feet in front of the plate, skipped past Jimmy Connelly, the Comets' catcher, and rolled all the way to the backstop.

The crowd howled. Some of them were Comets fans—she could see a scattering of familiar faces—but most were here for the show, the spectacle, the Babe. If the girl pitcher made a fool of herself, that was okay with them.

But Rue had never bounced a pitch by mistake in her life. No, that wasn't true, sure she had, once or twice. On rainy days, or freezing ones, when the ball felt like a chunk of ice in her hand.

It was warm and sunny today, though.

She met Babe Ruth a week after Captain Mansfield and the Yankees' owner, Colonel Rupert, old war buddies, arranged the big exhibition game. The Comets, with Rue starting, would face a team of minor-leaguers and local stars . . . plus the Babe, the only one who really mattered. The two owners knowing that even in the depths of the Great Depression, people would hand over their hard-earned dollars for a chance to see, as one of the tabloids put it, "Big Bam vs. Great Gams."

The Bambino was game for it. He was game for anything. Hospitals, orphanages, boxing rings, football fields, rodeos—just promise him some diversion and he'd be there.

They gathered for lunch at Lundy's Clam Shack, a little place built on wooden stilts over Sheepshead Bay. Rue and the Babe and his business manager, a silent man in an expensive suit who sipped coffee and kept a close eye on both of them throughout the meal, and dapper Colonel Ruppert and Captain Mansfield, who kept grinning like kids on Christmas morning. All the other tables in the shack were empty, and Rue knew that this single lunch was probably costing more than she earned all year.

While they talked, the Bambino ate a mountain of steamed clams, drowning each one in butter before chomping it down. Rue tried to keep count, but lost track after thirty-four. That was early in the lunch.

"Call me Jidge," Ruth told her. He called her "kid," but that was okay, it was what he called almost everybody. And anyway, she *was*

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a kid, and sure felt like one facing the Babe across a table. He was bigger than she'd thought from the newsreels and pictures, and under his extra flesh she could see the rippling muscles of his arms and torso.

He saw her looking at him. "So, kid, you think you can strike me out?"

She shrugged.

"Well," he said, "*I* think I can hit your best pitch into the Atlantic Ocean."

"Atlantic's behind home plate," she said. "Foul territory."

His eyes narrowed. "Okay, the Pacific. Just take the ball a little longer to get there."

"Might take longer than you think," she said.

The Babe stared at her, then began to laugh. "*Okay,*" he said, as if she'd passed a test. "I got an idea. Let's make this fun."

"Oh, I know it's going to be fun, Jidge," Captain Mansfield said.

The Babe shot him a look that shut him up and turned back to Rue. "Tell you what, kid," he said. "You bounce the first one, get everybody laughing. Then you give me something funny, like a big old curve, and I'll swing and miss by a mile." His face crinkled into a grin. "I'll kick up a big fuss, a real hullabaloo, which should get the folks' attention."

"And after that?" Rue asked.

"After that?" Serious now, he gave her a direct look, a look of supreme self-confidence.

"After that, no script," he said. "Just you against me, kid."

The Babe missed Rue's second pitch by at least three feet, spinning so hard after his wild swing that it looked like he was trying to drill himself into the ground. He stared out at her in what seemed like shocked disbelief, then threw his bat to the ground with such violence that it raised a puff of dust when it hit. Stomping around the plate, he swore and shook his fists and waved his arms around, while Jimmy Connelly and old Byron Mack, the umpire, the other players on the field, and the whole enormous bellowing crowd, ate it up.

Rue thought the grandstands might come down around her ears.

Finally Jimmy threw the ball back to her. The Babe picked up his bat and started settling himself into his stance. But then he stopped, and Rue saw him grin. He raised his bat and pointed with it towards the deepest part of centerfield.

"The Pacific Ocean, kid," he called out.

Rue started to laugh, but the sound caught in her throat. Rubbing the ball between her palms, she let her gaze slide away from the Babe to a man sitting in the front row of the stands just to the left of home plate. A man who remained entirely still while the fans surged around him.

An old man with wiry white hair, bushy eyebrows, a lined face,

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and pale, piercing eyes that never seemed to blink.

Rue felt her heart thump against her ribs. She dragged her attention back to home plate. Jimmy gave her the sign: One finger for a fastball.

Just you against me, kid.

It was time.

"It's time," the old man said. "Well past time. This can't go any further."

Rue didn't know what he was talking about. "Further?"

"Girls aren't meant to play baseball," he said.

Rue had heard it before, many times before, usually from opposing players before she faced them, and then again—in a different tone—after. She'd been hearing it since she was nine, and the words had long since lost any meaning to her.

Until now, just two days before her confrontation with Babe Ruth.

Judge Kenesaw Mountain Landis, the first commissioner of baseball, the Czar, leaned back in his chair and looked at her. He was the man the baseball owners had brought in after the 1919 World Series to kick the crooks and gamblers out of the game, the man with power enough to make the rules and enforce them.

"Baseball is too strenuous for women," Landis said, holding her in his cold, unblinking gaze. "You are not constitutionally suited to it."

Rue spread her arms as if to say, *Look at me.* "I'm fine."

"That's not the point. You're setting a bad example."

"But I haven't done anything wrong."

He looked nettled. "That's not the point either," he said. "I can't tolerate having you out there on the field."

Rue felt her temper flare. "Why?" she asked, hating her passionless voice. "Because I strike them out? Because I *win?*"

He didn't reply.

She took a deep breath. She'd always sworn she wouldn't beg for anything, but still she forced the words out. "I need this," she said.

Judge Landis gave the slightest shrug inside his expensive suit. "I'm sorry."

They sat in silence for a few moments in the dimly lit room with its smell of cigars and whiskey and treated leather. Then she said, struggling to keep her voice even. "What about Saturday?"

"Saturday," the Czar said, shaking his head. "I've given a substantial amount of thought to Saturday, and I've decided to let the game go on as scheduled. The fans—and Captain Mansfield—would be too disappointed if I canceled your—" He cleared his throat. "Your confrontation with the Babe."

His thin lips turned downward. "But I will make the announcement immediately afterwards." He shook his head. "Articles about you in *The Sporting News, Baseball* magazine, even *The New York Times.* You're making a mockery of the game."

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"Jidge doesn't think so," she said.

Landis's bushy eyebrows shot upward like outraged caterpillars. "Oh," he said, "now we're taking lessons in dignity from *Babe Ruth?*"

After that she knew it was hopeless. He was just an old man. He had no idea what it felt like to be standing out there on the field during a game. The Babe did, and Jimmy Connelly, and she did too. Every player did. But not the Czar.

She got to her feet, the room's still air roaring in her ears. He rose too, came around his desk, and walked her across the room.

"Enjoy your last hurrah," he said, closing the door behind her.

You've got no choice.

"See?" Chase said. "Told you so."

They'd met this time at a delicatessen in Borough Park, a world away from Coney Island and anyone she knew. The windows were streaked with steam, and a bowl of pickled tomatoes sent up sour fumes from the tabletop between them. They were the only people in the place speaking English.

"You knew that Landis was going to throw me out?" Rue asked.

"Sure." Chase looked bored. "Only a matter of time."

He showed his teeth. "Notice something about baseball?" he said. "It's all about white men."

Rue took a deep breath. "Okay. What do you want me to do?"

His eyes brightened and he leaned forward. "Just throw one pitch," he said. "That's all we're asking."

Jimmy Connelly signaled fastball.

Rue nodded. She stood on the rubber, the ball shielded in her glove. Usually, all her focus would be on the plate, the batter, the catcher's mitt. But this time she let her attention stray from the Babe, deadly serious now, and back over to Judge Landis in the first row.

Her eyes met his. He didn't blink or change expression.

Then, amid all the blurred frenzy of the crowd, she glimpsed more purposeful movement, a dark figure moving towards him.

In a moment, much sooner than she'd anticipated, Chase stood behind the Czar's left shoulder. He was wearing a black leather jacket and a cloth cap pulled low over his brow.

Rue saw his hand come out of his coat pocket, saw the glint of sunlight off steel, and knew at last exactly what was about to happen.

Though really, she'd known from the start.

Judge Landis didn't notice, nor did Captain Mansfield beside him, or any of the fans around them. Just as Chase had predicted, every eye, every camera, was focused on the field, on the battle between pitcher and batter.

Rue went into her windup.

Enjoy your last hurrah, she thought.

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"Can you do it?" he asked.

Rue nodded.

"You sure? Be a bad idea to miss."

"I can hit him," she said.

"In the head?"

She didn't answer.

Chase frowned, then made a face and shrugged. "Okay, yeah, that's a lot to ask. But we've got a ton riding on the Cubs this year, and they have a straight shot through the Series if the Babe's not right." He paused. "Would be a great exacta, but that's okay. You just plunk Ruth good, put him on the ground, and we'll take care of the rest."

"What do you mean—the rest?"

For a moment his face darkened, but he got hold of himself. "Don't worry about that," he said.

They sat in silence for a few moments. Then she said, "If I say yes, I'll be able to keep pitching?"

"Garr-annn-teeed." He looked calm now, relaxed, as if he'd just put a penny into a gumball machine and knew the gum would soon come rolling out of the chute. "The next commish will know who's really in charge."

He paused, thinking about it. "Might even be, no one will *want* the job."

"All right," Rue said. "I'm in."

Chase smiled.

"Garr-annn-teeed," he said again.

The most famous man in America standing at home plate.

The crowd bellowing with anticipation.

The cold-eyed old Czar on his feet like everyone else, as still as death in his black coat and black hat.

The man in the aisle beside him, teeth shining white, something half-hidden in his hand.

The girl on the mound, awaiting an oncoming storm only she knew about.

The long, breathless moment preceding the pitch.

Rue rocked back, raised her hands above her head, broke them apart, hurled herself forward with the controlled violence that always ended with a fastball whistling across the plate. Only not this time. This time, in the middle of her motion, she stumbled.

Or seemed to stumble.

Her arm whipped forward and she released the ball, just as the toe of her spikes caught on a chewed-up patch of ground and she fell flat on her face.

Lying there, unmoving, she heard the dull, solid thump. There was a moment's pause, as if the world itself was holding its breath, and then the silence was broken by a woman's high-pitched shriek. This was followed by the upwelling, frightened sound of the crowd.

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Rue got slowly to her feet. She took her time looking over, because she didn't really need to. She knew what she was going to see.

But she had a role to play, so when she did look, she found herself running towards the stands. The commissioner of baseball was standing there, his face ashen as he stared down at something lying at his feet.

Chase, glazed eyes half open, an enormous purple knot sprouting from his left temple.

Rue scrambled over the railing and dropped to her knees beside the stricken man. Her face was full of shock and concern as she put her mouth close to his ear.

"To answer your question, I can hit anything I want to," she whispered, "*where* I want to."

He blinked, and his lips moved, but no sound came out.

"And I *always* have a choice," she said.

She got back to her feet and moved closer to Landis. He was hanging on the railing with both hands.

"It's him," she said so only he could hear. "Chase. I didn't get a chance to warn you—it happened too fast."

Rallying himself, the commissioner spoke to the cops who had congregated around his seat. It only took them a few seconds to find the knife pinned under Chase's body. That got everybody's attention.

When he was gone, heading to the hospital under the law's watchful eye, Rue looked up at the Czar. After a moment he gave a brief, reluctant nod.

"Thank you," she said, and went back to work.

It was the day before the big game, the "Battle 'tween Teen and Titan," in the words of one poetic scribe, and Judge Landis was exhausted.

He'd had enough. The New York dailies and out-of-town papers alike had been mad with excitement and anticipation for days. Reporters from as far away as Seattle and Santa Fe had been ringing his telephone off the hook. It was all he could do to keep his opinions to himself for one more day.

So the last thing he needed was to see the girl, the cause of all this tumult, walking into his office and perching on the edge of his desk as if she owned it.

"What are you doing here?" he asked her.

She didn't answer at once, but there was an expression on her face that he'd never seen there before. She looked, he thought suddenly, like someone who'd just won the World Series.

"Miss Thomas," he said, struggling to keep his temper, "we have nothing further to talk about."

"But we do," she said.

And then, leaning forward so he'd hear every word, she told him what it was, and what they were going to do about it.

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"Think you can get one over this time?" Babe Ruth asked her.

Rue grinned. They were standing midway between the mound and the plate. The players were back in their positions, and the crowd, quiet and subdued now, was focused on the field again.

"Sure," she said.

"Good. Then let's give them a show."

He turned away, then looked back over his shoulder. "Hey, kid."

She waited.

"Heard that old windbag Landis was going to toss you out after the game."

Rue shook her head. "You heard wrong. I'm not going anywhere."

"Yeah?" The Babe looked surprised. "Glad to hear it, 'cause you can throw."

"And you can hit, Jidge," she said.

He laughed and headed back to the plate. Got right into his stance, no fooling around this time. Jimmy Connelly signaled fastball, and Rue threw one.

The bat whipped around, and there was a sound like a cannon shot. The ball streaked upward and headed towards the Pacific Ocean.

The crowd let loose. The Babe dropped his bat and watched the blast leave the yard before starting his laughing, clownish circuit around the bases. Rue, stone-faced, held up her glove and waited for the ump to toss her a new ball.

But inside she was smiling. Sometimes, she knew, you just had to give the fans what they'd come to see. ●

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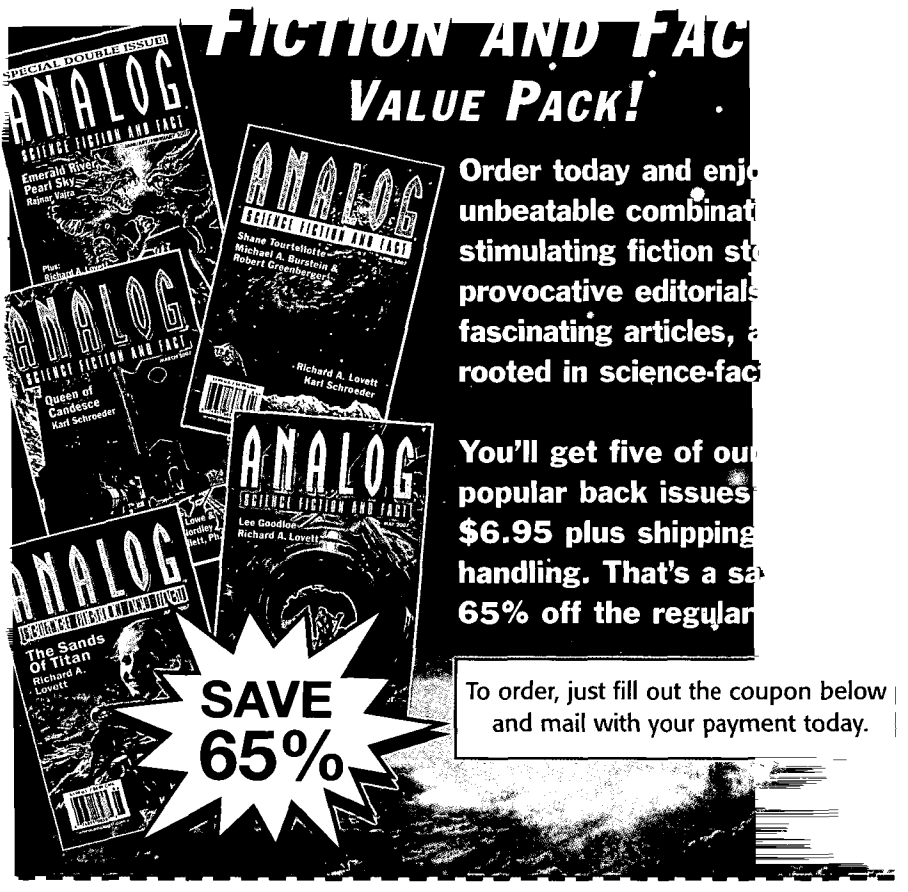

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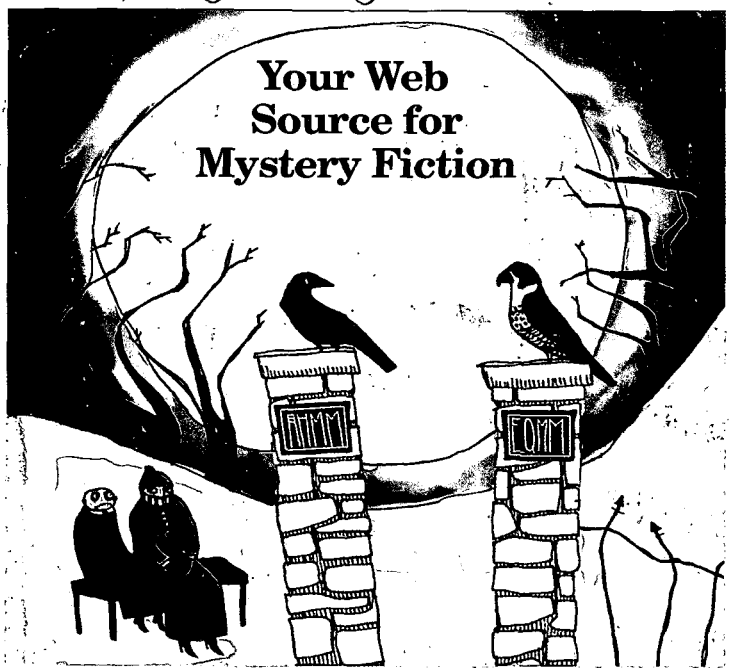

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